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THEY WRITE...

MICKEY SPILLANE

"Contrary to what most people expect, from my books, I've never shot a woman in the stomach nor beat up a man with my bare fists. I like people, especially children—I have two. I like animals—I have 10 cats and dogs. And I like guns—I have 10—although I've never used them on anything more deadly than a target. My philosophy? A simple one: If a guy wants to read, I'll entertain him."

IVAR JORGENSEN

"I was born 36 years ago in a little fishing village in Norway. We moved to this country when I was eight. After I graduated from college, I got a job with a construction company which sent me to Japan, where all my youthful idealism and knowledge went into building bridges. I spent five years following December 7, 1941, in the Air Force, blasting bridges. I started to write after the war—and the only building I intend to do from now on will be with words."

RICHARD MATHESON

"I sold my first story to my mother for 8c. My fictional outbursts were thoroughly activated when my sister gave me a typewriter for my thirteenth birthday. But for the grace of Smith-Corona, I'd probably be a plumber today. In addition to writing, I make fancy airplane parts out in Los Angeles where I live, and where I plan to write more and better science-fiction-fantasy."

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fantastic

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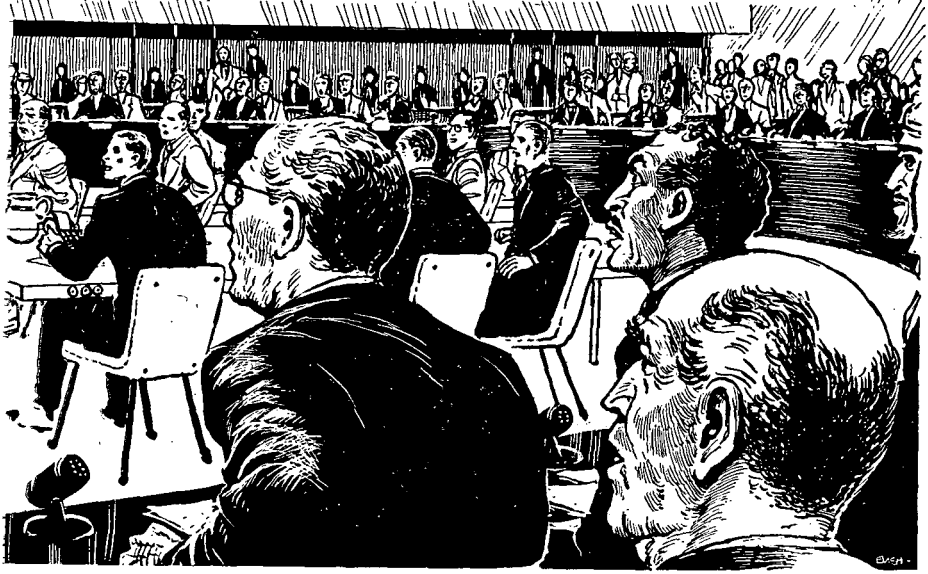
No modern-day writer is more widely cussed and discussed than Mickey Spillane. Critics regard him as most of us regard the atom bomb, leading magazines dissect him with unloving care.

Why? Because the Spillane emphasis is on sex and sadism, his milieu the boudoir and the underworld, his men ruthless, his women svelte, passionate and immoral. That's why everyone hates Spillane — except his millions of readers and his banker!

The editors of Fantastic *take pride in presenting the first science-fiction story by Mr. Spillane.*

LODI's soft warm hand shook me awake. "Sh-h-h, Karl. Don't say anything." I could barely hear her. "There's someone downstairs."

The .45 I kept under my pillow was in my hand before I had my eyes fully open. The bedroom was in total



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darkness because of the heavy curtains covering the windows, and the only sound was the almost inaudible purr of the air-conditioning unit. I pressed the fingers of my free hand lightly to Lodi's lips to still her whisper and to let her know I was now fully awake.

I swung my bare feet to the floor and stood up. The fact that I was as naked as one of Mike Angelo's cherubs didn't occur to me then, and even if it had I wouldn't have wasted time looking for a robe.

Moving on tiptoe, I crossed the room and was careful about shooting the bolts on the door. I could hear nothing from downstairs, but that didn't mean no one was down there. Lodi's almost incredibly sharp sense of hearing was something I had learned long ago not to doubt. Twenty years among the perils of the jungle develops the senses like nothing else, and the African jungle was where Lodi had come from.

With the door opened wide enough for me to slip through, I stepped into the upper hall. Still no sound. A tomb would have been noisier. No light either. It was like walking through a bottle of ink.

Still no sound from below. I wasn't surprised. Whoever was down there wouldn't be a common garden-variety burglar. Burglars didn't come out here in the wilderness eighty-odd miles north of New York City in search of loot.

I went down that flight of carpeted steps like a jungle cat stalking its prey. The damp chill of early morning began to flow across my skin, reminding me of my lack of clothing. At the foot of the stairs I froze in my tracks, listening, making sure the safety catch on the .45 was off.

More silence. Nothing stirred, nothing breathed. Had Lodi been mistaken after all? Had her nerves, under a growing strain for almost two months now, finally started to give way? I refused to believe it. . . .

And then I heard it. A sound so slight that only keen ears straining to listen would possibly have caught it. The chink of metal against metal, and that only once.

The study. The wall safe was in there; a vault actually, built by the previous owner. It would be the natural place for an intruder to start his search.

Silently I crossed to the study door, the gun ready in my fist. The door, I discovered, had been left open no more than an inch or two to enable the man in there to catch any sound from outside the room.

Slowly, with almost painful care, I pushed the door inward. As the space between its edge and the jamb widened, I saw a circle

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of light fixed on the combination knob of the vault. A man was standing there, one ear pressed to the metal surface of the vault door, his fingers slowly manipulating the dial. He was alone.

I leaned forward and groped along the wall until my fingers found the light switch. I flipped it, flooding the room with light, said, "Cheerio, you son of a bitch," and shot him through the head.

The sound of the heavy .45 was like an exploding bomb in the confines of that small room. Blood and brains and bone showered the vault door and the black-clad figure melted into the rug.

"Karl!" It was Lodi calling from the head of the stairs. "Darling, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I said. "Go on back to bed, baby. I'll be up in a minute."

"Did you . . . did you — ?"

"I sure as hell did. I'll tell you about it over grapefruit in the morning."

I crossed the room and knelt beside the body. There wasn't much left of him above the eyebrows, and what was below them was a face I had never seen before. The pockets held nothing personal that might identify him. An oiled-silk packet containing as nice a set of burglar tools as you'd find anywhere, but that and a half-empty pack of Philip Morris made up the total.

I didn't like that. In fact, I liked it so little that I scooped the .45 off the rug and stood up, all in one quick movement.

Too late! Before I could turn around a silken drawl said, "No further, Mr. Terris. Stand perfectly still."

I said a couple words under my breath but that was as far as I went. I heard the rustle of silk and the sound of light steps coming toward my back. "Let the gun drop. . . . Now, kick it away from you."

I could smell her now: the music of an expensive perfume and the nice female smell of a lovely woman. The drawl said, "You may turn around now and lower your hands. Any more than that and I'll shoot you through the knee."

She was wearing black, broken only by a white appliqued design just above the left breast. A pastel mink jacket hung casually from perfect shoulders and she was as blonde as a wheat field. It would have been a shame for her not to be beautiful, and beautiful she was, and not with the standard, nightclub kind of beauty that's almost commonplace these days.

"Which knee?" I said.

"I know all about you, Mr. Terris," she said coolly. "Forty million dollars and a sense of humor. Only I don't want any of either."

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"That's a relief," I said. "What *do* you want?"

She was standing in front of me, a gun large in her hand, a slight smile tugging at the corners of an almost sensual mouth. Her eyes went over me frankly and with something more than faint approval. "Do you find the evening oppressively warm?"

I glanced down at my naked body, then back up at her. "I'm sorry. Would you like to wait while I run up and get into my dress suit?"

"I'm afraid we can't spare the time." She walked over to a lamp table and whisked the large scarf off it and tossed it to me. "Do something with this," she said. "I find your — well, your masculinity a little overpowering."

The scarf was on the skimpy side but I made it do. She leaned against the back of a lounge chair and went on pointing the gun at me. "And now back to business, Mr. Terris. I came here for that machine you brought back from Africa."

"You're not strong enough to lift it."

"Are you?"

"Just barely."

"That's fine. My car is waiting. You can carry it out and put it in the trunk."

I shook my head. "No dice, Blondie."

"You'd rather have a bullet through your leg?"

"Any day," I said. "Because some day the leg would heal, the bone would mend. And then I'd find you and I'd kill you. Nice and slow, then use your guts for shoe laces and your spine for a necktie rack."

She smiled. "Tough guy. We know all about you. I don't scare, Mr. Terris, but neither do you, unfortunately. Threatening you with personal injury is a waste of time. I told them that, but they wanted me to try it anyway. Well, I tried."

Without taking her eyes off me, she raised her voice. "Stephan. Gregory. Come here."

Two men, one large and bull-necked and with a face like a dropped melon, the other slim and white-faced and black-eyed, appeared in the doorway behind her. Both held guns in their right hands.

"Mr. Terris refuses to frighten, gentlemen," the girl said. "Go up and get Mrs. Terris. Tie and gag her and put her in the car. Let me know when you're ready to leave."

They turned silently and started out. I said, "Hold it." They kept on going. I said, "Call off your dogs, Sadie."

Her quiet voice stopped them as though they'd run into a wall. Her confident smile revealed flawless teeth. "Yes, Mr. Terris?"

"There is no machine. There never was."

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Her smile now was almost sad. "Lies won't help. In fact, I'm surprised you even bother to try them on me."

"I mean it, Sadie. The first time I heard about my having a machine was ten days ago. Two men broke into my apartment in New York and demanded I hand 'the machine' over to them. You may have read about it in the papers."

The gun in her hand stayed as steady as Mount Hood. "Yes. You killed them both. With your bare hands, I believe — or was that just tabloid talk?"

"No."

"They were bunglers, Mr. Terris. I am not. Do you give us what we came for, or do we take your wife instead?"

My muscles began to ache from the strain of not jumping straight into the muzzle of her gun. "I'm telling you, Sadie: there is no machine. Somebody's given you a bum steer."

Her sigh was small but unmistakable. "Fifty-three days ago," she said, "you arrived in New York aboard a small steamer which you chartered at Dakar. This was almost exactly two years after your small plane crashed somewhere in the interior of French Equatorial Africa while you were searching for a uranium deposit in that section of the continent. Your government combed the area for weeks without finding any trace of your plane, and you were given up for lost. Am I correct so far?"

"The newspapers carried the story," I said.

"Your arrival in New York," she went on in the same even, unhurried voice, "created a major sensation. The country's richest, handsomest, most eligible bachelor had returned from the dead! Only the bachelor part no longer applied: you had brought back as your bride the world's most beautiful woman. I believe that's how she was described — although no one has been able to see her face clearly through the heavy veil she constantly wears. In fact, no one but you knows what your wife looks like. True, Mr. Terris?"

I shrugged and said nothing.

"You then placed your bride in the penthouse suite of a building you owned in Manhattan. You engaged no servants; you had no callers. No one — I repeat, *no one* — was permitted to enter your apartment. You were called to Washington to report on the success of your search for the uranium deposit. You stated that your mission was a failure. As a loyal and patriotic citizen — as well as one of the wealthiest — your statement was accepted and the matter closed."

She paused to raise an eyebrow at me meaningly. "Closed, that is, until two weeks ago. For it was

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about that time that a man and his wife were found dead in a small hotel in Nice. The cause of death was so startling that an immediate investigation was made. Do you know what killed those two people, Mr. Terris?"

"Measles?" I hazarded.

Her jaw hardened. "Radiation, Mr. Terris. A kind of radiation sickness not known before. Those two people died of cosmic radiation!"

"Do tell!"

She took a slow breath and her eyes bored into me. "Further investigation established that the dead couple had been exposed to the radiation roughly five weeks earlier. At that time they were occupying a cabin on a small steamer en route to Sweden. By a strange coincidence, Mr. Terris, it was the same steamer that brought you and your wife to America a few days before. By an even stranger coincidence, they had occupied the same cabin used by you and your wife. But the ultimate in coincidences, Mr. Terris, is that you had been in Africa in search of a fissionable material!"

"As you've pointed out," I said, "a matter of coincidence."

She shook her head. "I'm afraid it's not that simple. The inescapable conclusion is that, while in Africa, you discovered some method of trapping and converting the power of cosmic radiation.

Either you found some natural substance that would do this, or — more likely — you were able to construct a machine that would do so. The residue from some leakage in the machine's operation was picked up by the unfortunate couple who next engaged that cabin, causing their deaths."

"No machine," I said. "I don't know what you're talking about. Go ahead. Search the house. But tell your goons to keep their hands off my wife. I mean it."

She wasn't listening. "Any country, Mr. Terris, who controls the secret you've learned will own the earth. As usual, your own government has only just learned

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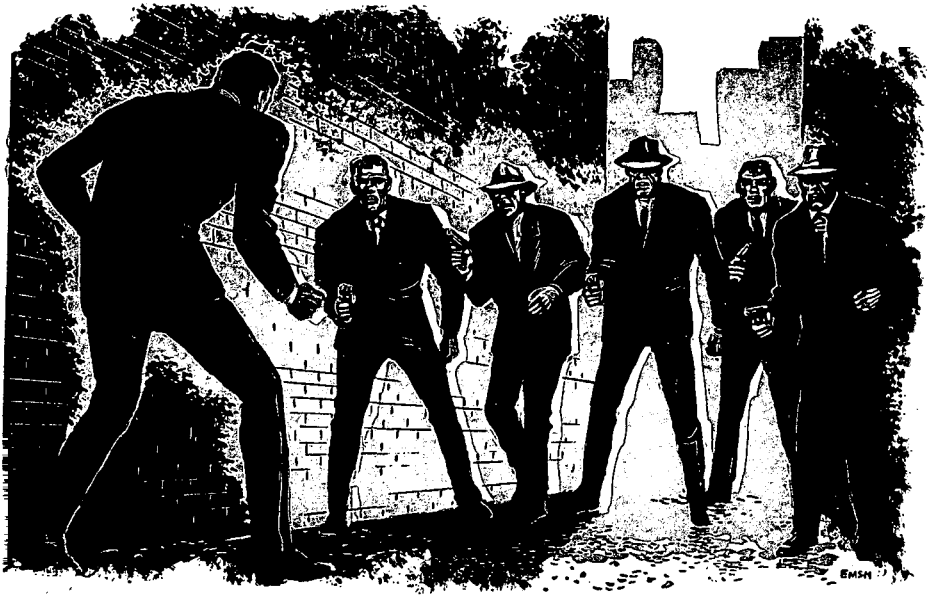

the facts as I have given them to you. I happen to know that within a few days you'll be summoned to Washington and asked for the secret you hold. My government wants it instead — and we mean to have it!"

"If I had anything like what you're talking about," I said, "why wouldn't I have turned it over to Washington before this?"

She smiled. "I think I can answer that. It's well known that you are against war — that you narrowly escape being called a pacifist. To turn this secret over to the military of your government might very well lead to war."

"And in the hands of *your* government?"

"Peace, Mr. Terris. Peace because no other country or coalition of countries could prevail against us. Universal adherence to the principles of true democracy — the people's democracy."

"You mean communism, Sadie?"

"Exactly."

"Love that people's democracy," I said. "Slave labor, purges, secret police, rigged trials, mass executions. Good-bye, Sadie. Sorry, no machines today."

"You prefer that we take your wife?"

"A word of advice," I said.

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"Keep your nail polish off my wife. Otherwise I'll spend the rest of my life and forty million dollars, if it takes that long and that much, finding you and your stooges. And when I do, I'll be judge, jury and executioner. You'll die like no one ever died before."

My words were just words, but my tone and my expression were something else again. The color faded in her cheeks and the gun barrel wavered slightly. But her smile was steady enough and faintly mocking.

"I think you mean that," she said quietly. Her free hand moved up and settled the mink jacket closer about her flawless shoulders. "But I've learned long since to pay no attention to threats. . . . Last opportunity. Do you hand over what we came for."

"You talk American real good, Sadie. They must have fine schools in Leningrad."

Her lips twitched. "Westchester, Mr. Terris. And one of the best finish —" She stopped abruptly and all expression faded from her lovely face. "Where is the machine?"

I spread my hands. "You're slipping your clutch, Blondie. No machine. I told you that."

Her patience began to break up. "You fool!" she blazed. "You're actually going to hand us your wife rather than surrender it? You're as cold-blooded as a snake, Mr. Terris!"

"You can call me Karl," I said.

She stepped back and nodded to the two men behind her. They came forward cautiously, guns ready, circled until they were behind me. I went on looking at the blonde, memorizing every line of her face, the lobes of her ears, the curve of her nostrils, the shape of her eyes. Suddenly the muzzle of a gun ground savagely into my back and a hand closed firmly on one of my naked arms. Before I could twist away the needle of a hypodermic lanced into my shoulder, the plunger thudded down and I staggered back.

I stood there panting, still staring at the girl. I could feel my lips curl back in a strained rictus of hatred. A buzzing sound began to crawl into my ears.

"It had better finish me, Sadie," I said around my thickening tongue. "If I come through this, you'll feed five generations of worms."

She was leaning slightly forward, her eyes glittering, the tip of her tongue touching her parted lips, her breathing quick and shallow, watching the drug take hold of me. The gun in her hand was forgotten.

I tried to lift an arm. Somebody had tied an anvil to it. The City Hall was glued to my feet. The room clouded, wavered, then slowly dissolved. I fell face forward into the ruins. . . .

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II

A voice said, "You made two mistakes, Sadie. You let me see your face and you said too much. Just a little too much, but enough."

It was my voice. I was talking out loud, coming out of it. I opened my eyes and rolled over and looked at the ceiling. Back of my eyes somebody had built a fire and left the ashes.

After a while I tried getting to my feet. It seemed to take a long time, but I finally made it. I stood there holding onto the back of a chair and let my eyes move around the room.

Sunlight was fighting to get in through the half-closed Venetian blinds at the two windows. The man I had shot earlier was still dead on the floor, with a pool of almost black blood under what was left of his head. The vault door stood wide open with its contents scattered. The rest of the room had the look of being worked over by a platoon of Marines armed with bayonets. Upholstery had been ripped to shreds, pictures were torn from the walls, drapes were piled in one corner; bookcases had been cleared ruthlessly.

Anger began to rise inside me. I crossed to the ruins of the small bar in one corner of the room, found a bottle of bourbon and drank a solid slug of the contents. The stuff almost put me back on the floor, but when the first shock passed my brain was working again.

I went up the stairs at a wavering run. The bedroom door stood open and Lodi was gone. The room itself was as much a shambles as the study downstairs, and the rest of the house was no better.

"It's all right, Lodi," I muttered. "They won't dare harm you. They'll wait a couple of days for me to get good and worried, then they'll get in touch with me and try to make a deal. Only I'm not going to wait that long."

In the kitchen I ate toast and drank four cups of scalding black coffee. Then I went back into the study and picked up the phone and called a number in the Lenox Hill section of New York City.

"Eddie? Karl. Now get this. I want all year books for the past ten years put out by all the finishing schools on the East Coast. Have them in your office two hours from now. . . . How the hell do I know? You've got an organization; put it to work. As fast as they come in put people to work going through them to pick out every girl who lived in Westchester County at the time she was attending school. The girl I want is around twenty-five or twenty-six, so tell them to keep that in mind. You've got two hours, and I don't want any excuses."

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I slammed down the receiver while he was still talking and looked around for the gun I had dropped on the rug the night before. It was still there, half buried under papers from the vault. I went back upstairs to shave, bathe and dress, then found a shoulder holster for the .45 and slid my suit coat on over it.

I walked out the front door and down the driveway. It was getting on toward ten o'clock and the sun was hot on my shoulders. In the valley a mile down the slope was the nearest highway to New York. Cars and trucks moved along the concrete ribbon, looking like ants on a garden path.

My convertible was where I had left it the day before. I was checking the tires when the sound of an engine coming up the gravel road to the house froze me. I stepped behind the car and unbuttoned my coat and waited.

A gray Plymouth turned into the highway and stopped and a man in his early thirties got out from behind the wheel. There was no one else in the car. He saw me standing there, nodded and started toward me without hurrying. He wasn't anyone I knew.

When he was about twenty feet away I slid my hand under the left lapel of my jacket and said, "That's close enough, friend."

He stopped abruptly and stared at my right arm, a puzzled look on his smooth, not unhandsome face. "I'm afraid I don't understand this. Are you Mr. Terris?"

"That's right."

"I'd like a word with you."

"Sure," I said. "What word would you like?"

He smiled crookedly. "I wish you'd take your hand out of there, Mr. Terris. It gives me the feeling you're about to pull a gun on me."

"That," I said, "is the general idea. Just who the hell are you?"

He kept his hands carefully away from his body. "The name is Granger, Mr. Terris. I'm an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Would you like to see my credentials?"

"Not especially," I said. "What is it you want?"

He laughed shortly. "Well, to put it bluntly — you! It seems there's a Congressional committee meeting in Washington this afternoon and they want you there. The AEC, to be exact. I was asked to come up and — ah — escort you there."

I recalled that the blonde had said something about that a few hours earlier. Whatever her pipeline, it certainly was reliable. I shook my head. "Sorry, Mr. Granger. I won't be able to make it. Another engagement — a rather pressing one. Good-bye."

He wasn't smiling now. "Afraid you don't understand, sir. I have a subpoena calling for your appearance at that hearing."

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"That's different," I said. I took my hand from under my coat and walked over to him. "Can I give you some breakfast before we leave?"

Granger eyed me warily. "No, thanks. I've had breakfast. We'd better be getting into New York. We're catching a twelve-o'clock plane. I suppose you'll want to pack a bag."

"Good idea," I said and turned and started back to the house with him beside me. We went up on the porch and through the front door. Granger took one look at the wreckage from last night's activities and his jaw dropped. "What hap —"

That was as far as he got before the edge of my hand caught him sharply on the back of the neck. He folded like a carpenter's rule, out cold. I caught him before he hit the floor and carried him into the living room. I found some strong cord in the kitchen and bound his hands behind him and his feet to the legs of the couch, careful not to cut off the circulation.

He opened his eyes while I was finishing up. "You're making a serious mistake, Mr. Terris."

I tightened the last knot and straightened up. "You won't be too uncomfortable. Mrs. Morgan, the cleaning woman, should show up about two this afternoon and she'll cut you loose. Incidentally, you'll find a body in the study. My work; I'll tell you about it some day."

I was out the front door before he could protest further. The convertible came alive under my foot and I roared down the curving gravel side-road to where it joined the highway.

III

At eleven-thirty-six I pulled into the curb in front of an office building on Madison Avenue in the Seventies. I rode the elevator to the ninth floor and entered the first door to a suite that took up most of one corridor. The legend on that door read "Edward Treeglos, Investments." The only investment involved was the money I invested to keep the place staffed and functioning. I had set it up, under the management of Eddie Treeglos, a former college friend of mine, five years before, at the time I came into the vast holdings from my father's estate. Its purpose was to handle matters too confidential to be taken care of by the mammoth organization, further downtown, known as The Terris Foundation.

I passed the receptionist before she could get her nose out of a magazine, and charged into Eddie's private office without bothering to knock.

He was behind his desk, his sharp-featured intelligent face bent over a pile of thin, outsize volumes

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bound in everything from leather to glossy stock. He looked up as I came in.

"Did you know," he said, "that four out of every ten girls attending finishing school on the East Coast come from Westchester County?"

I said, "When I want percentages I'll ask for them. What have you got?"

He gestured toward the pile of volumes. "Help yourself, playboy. The pages with Westchester babes are marked, and I've got six girls in the other offices going through more books. If I never see a sweet innocent school-girl face again it'll be fine with me."

At one o'clock I was still going strong, flipping pages, scanning face after face, as many as thirty to a page. One of the office girls brought in sandwiches and coffee; they cooled and were finally taken away without my even noticing them.

Slowly my hopes were beginning to dim. Maybe that blonde was cleverer than I had supposed. Her seemingly careless remark might have been a deliberate plant to throw me off the track. If so, she was too good for her job; she should have been the head of the entire Russian M.V.B. And then, just when I was about ready to sweep the books to the floor with rage, I spotted the face I was hunting for.

I came close to missing it entirely. She wore her hair different then and her face was fuller. But the angle to her nose and the high cheek bones and the slope of her jaw were unmistakable. She stared up at me from the glossy paper, the eyes wide and direct, the same faint curl to her lips. *Do you find the evening oppressively warm, Mr. Terris?*

Under the photo were several lines of type. They told me her name was Ann Fullerton, that she lived at 327 Old Colony Drive, Larchmont, New York, that she was a political science major. She belonged to a swank sorority, was vice-president of her senior class and had been mixed up in a lot of campus activities that probably would make fascinating reading for her children — if she lived long enough to have any.

My eyes went back to the mocking smile. "Laugh, baby," I muttered. "Laugh while you can. Your belly will make me a fine dart board."

Across the desk, Eddie stared at me open-mouthed. "Take it slow, pal. You sound like a goddam tax collector."

I ripped the page out, shoved a pile of the books to the floor and pulled the phone over in front of me. "Tell the help to forget it. I've found what I'm after."

"Sure, sure. You feel like telling me what's going on?"

"Next week," I said. "You got a Westchester phone directory?"

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He shrugged, reached out and flipped a lever on the intercom and told the receptionist to bring one in. I leafed through the Fullertons and found an Eric Fullerton living at the same address in Larchmont shown on the page from the year book. I dialed the number.

"Fullerton residence," a man's voice said.

I made my voice brisk and business-like. "Is this Mr. Fullerton?"

"Mr. Fullerton is not in, sir. Caldwell, the butler, speaking. Is there a message?"

"I'll talk to Ann Fullerton," I said.

The silence at the other end lasted long enough to be shocked. ". . . . I'm afraid there's some mistake, sir. Miss Ann Fullerton died almost a year ago."

"*What!*"

"Yes, sir."

I got my chin up off my necktie. "Look — uh, Caldwell. Is Mrs. Fullerton there?"

"Yes, sir. Who shall I say is calling?"

"My name is . . . Carney. Alan Carney."

"One moment, Mr. Carney."

The receiver went down and I lit a cigarette, getting over the shock. There wasn't the slightest chance that the girl in the year book and the girl who had held a gun on me a few hours before were not one and the same. I had studied her face much too carefully to be mistaken.

A quiet voice said, "This is Mrs. Fullerton."

I said, "I hate to bother you, Mrs. Fullerton. I had no idea, of course, that your daughter . . ."

"I understand, Mr. Carney."

"You see, it's very important that I get in touch with a former friend of Ann's. A girl named . . . Taylor — Mollie Taylor. I wonder if you could tell me anything about her."

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Carney." Her voice sounded flat, almost weary. "You see, I didn't know Ann's friends. She hadn't lived with us for nearly two years before her death."

I said, "Would you mind giving me her address at the time? It's just possible somebody there could help me."

"We never knew her address, Mr. Carney. Ann was employed by an importing company. Anton & Porkov, I believe it was called."

"In New York?"

"Yes. I don't know the street address."

I wrote the name on a pad. "You've been very patient, Mrs. Fullerton. I know how painful all this has been for you. But would you mind telling me the circumstances of your daughter's death?"

There was a lengthy pause during which I expected her quietly to hang up the receiver. When she finally did speak I could barely

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hear her. "Ann died in a warehouse fire. I'm afraid that's all I can tell you. Good-bye, Mr. Carney."

A dry click told me the connection had been broken. I hung up and sat there staring at my thumb. All I had to do now was find a girl who had died months before, but who last night had engineered the kidnaping of my wife. Lodi's secret was now known to at least three people other than me. I should never have taken her out of Africa. I thought of her in the hands of those two silent ghouls and the blonde and a cold fury shook me. The mere fact that they had discovered what was behind Lodi's veil meant they must die. How they would die would depend on how they had treated her.

Eddie Treeglos was watching me wide-eyed. I tripped the lever on the intercom and said to the receptionist, "Get me the street address of Anton & Porkov, importers." I closed the key and leaned back in my chair and looked at Eddie through the smoke of my cigarette. "Does that name — Anton & Porkov — mean anything to you?"

"Can't say it does."

"My wife was snatched last night, Eddie."

"We'll get her back, Karl."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, we'll get her back." I got up and walked across the office and slapped my hand hard against the wall. For no reason. I turned and came back to the desk just as the intercom buzzer sounded. I moved the key again. "Well?"

"There is a listing for Anton & Porkov at 774 West Thirty-first Street, sir. The phone number is Clinton 9-5444. Also a listing for Sergi Porkov at 917 East Sixty-eighth. Butterfield 4-6793. It's the only other Porkov in the book, so it may be the same man."

I wrote it all down and closed the line. "I want a full report on that outfit, Eddie. They're importers; Washington should give you a line on them. No direct inquiries; I don't want them to know they're being checked. You've got half an hour."

"You're the boss."

"Yeah." I tossed the page from the year book across the desk to him. "Ann Fullerton. Check the police files to learn if she's got a record. Call Osborne at the FBI and see if he's got anything on her. And anything else you think of."

"Right."

I moved my hand and the .45 was in it, pointed at him. All he did was blink. "Just finding out if I've still got the speed," I said.

He nodded. "I never even saw your hand move, brother."

"That's nice to know," I said. I picked up the slip with the addresses and phone numbers on it, folded it small and put it behind

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my display handkerchief. "I'll call you in half an hour. About Anton & Porkov."

"Okay."

I gave him a brief nod and walked over to the door and out.

IV

I stopped off at the Roosevelt Hotel and had lunch in the Men's Grill, then supplied myself with a handful of change and entered one of the phone booths. I put through a person-to-person call to Senator McGill at the Senate Building in Washington. My father had put him in office almost sixteen years before, and kept him there. When you own between forty and fifty million bucks in one form and another you need a loud voice where it can be heard.

His secretary told him who was calling and he came on the wire very excited. "Karl, you young idiot, are you trying to ruin me?"

"That's what I like about you, Senator," I said. "Always worrying about your friends rather than yourself."

"Oh, stop it! Have you any idea what the penalty is for attacking a Federal officer?"

"How did he work it so fast?" I asked. "I figured Mrs. Morgan would be untieing him about now. What's behind all this subpoena business anyway?"

His voice was desperate. "You're in trouble, boy. The AEC

says you lied about not getting anything useful out of Africa. They have good reason to think you came out of there with some kind of gadget to do with cosmic energy, whatever the hell that is. You better get down here and straighten things out before it's too late."

"Nuts to that," I said. "I got something a lot more important to take care of. Get them to call off their dogs."

His voice went up four octaves. "You think I'm the President? Not only does the AEC want you for questioning, but you're charged with attacking an FBI man and committing a murder! You grab a plane and get out here in nothing

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flat. Demarest of the Attorney General's office called me not more than half an hour ago and said they were getting out a general alarm to have you picked up."

"Get it cancelled."

"I tell you I can't! What's more, they've issued a subpoena for your wife. Word's gotten around she's the one who gave you that gadget, and this business of her going around heavily veiled, no one ever seeing what she looks like, is beginning to look mighty suspicious."

"You think I give a damn how it looks? I'm telling you, get these alphabet boys out of my hair. Or are you tired of being a senator?"

"Don't you threaten me, you young upstart! I was making laws in this country while you were still soiling diapers. My record — "

"Stick your record," I cut in. "You get that general alarm withdrawn and those subpoenas held up or I'll plaster the darker side of your precious record over the front pages of every newspaper in the country."

He was still sputtering when I slammed down the receiver. I went into the Rough Rider Room at the Roosevelt and had a couple of bourbons to settle my lunch and get the taste of politicians out of my mouth. My strapwatch showed 2:10. I went out into the hot sun and slid behind the wheel of the convertible and drove through a blue fog of exhaust fumes until I reached the 700 block on West Thirty-first.

It was a crummy neighborhood. Ancient loft buildings and sagging tenements and fly-specked delicatessens and cut-rate liquor stores and wise punks hanging around corner taverns. It stunk of dirt and poverty, with an occasional whiff of stale water and dead fish from the Hudson River a block to the west. A puff of tired air moved through the littered gutters and blew dust in my face.

I parked behind a truck half a block from 774 and waded through dirty-faced brats and sloppy-breasted housewives until I reached a corner drugstore. There were a couple of phone booths at the rear and I called Eddie Treeglos from one of them.

"What've you got, Eddie?"

"A thing or two. One, Sergi Porkov, alias Sam Parks, is one of the top Russian agents in this country. At present he is reported to be somewhere in Mexico. He's a tall blond guy, in his early forties, looks like a Swedish diplomat — at least that's the way my source of information described him — and has three rather large pockmarks on his left cheek. Two, Maurice Anton, his former partner in the importing firm, died of cancer at Morningside General Hospital four months ago. At that time Porkov sold the importing business to a man named Luke

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Ritter; no record on him but he's suspected of being a front man for Porkov. That's it, Karl."

I breathed in some of the booth's odor of cheap cigars. "Anything on Ann Fullerton?"

"Yeah. Identified by a close friend as one of the victims of a fire nine months ago at a warehouse owned by the Fullbright Radio Company. Body was too badly burned for the parents to make a positive identification, but a purse under the body was hers. It was in the papers at the time."

"Who was the friend that made the I. D.?"

"Nobody seems to know. I'm working on it."

"Anything else on her?"

"Well, she was one of these college pinks. Carried banners on a couple of picket lines, belonged to several commie front outfits and so on. But right after she left school she dropped out of sight and nobody seems to have heard of her until she got too close to the fire. Except for one possible connection."

"Let's have it, Eddie."

"Here about eight, nine months ago, Sergi Porkov came up with a new girl friend — a knockout of a blonde named Arleen Farmer. The similarity in initials could mean something."

"You can bet on it," I said. "Got an address on her?"

"She was living with Porkov at the Sixty-eighth Street address."

"Nothing else?"

He sounded aggrieved. "My God, isn't that enough? You only gave me half an hour."

I cut him off, got out the list of addresses and phone numbers the girl at Eddie's had given me, and looked up Porkov's home phone. I stood there and listened to the buzz come back over the wire. No answer. I let it ring a dozen times before I decided that Anton & Porkov was the place to start.

I hung up and stopped at the cigar counter for cigarettes. Outside, the sun still baked the street. I walked slowly on down to 774, a loft building of battered red brick, four floors, with a hand laundry and a job printer flanking the entrance.

The lobby was narrow and had been swept out shortly before they built the Maginot Line. It smelled like toadstools in the rain, with a binder of soft-coal smoke held over from the previous winter.

A thin flat-faced kid with horn-rimmed glasses and a mop of black hair was propped up on a backless kitchen chair outside a freight elevator, buried to the eyebrows in a battered copy of Marx's *Das Kapital*. I brought him out of it by kicking one of the chair legs.

"Fie on you," I said. "You ought to know that stuff's rank

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bourgeois deviationism."

He looked up at me like a pained owl. He couldn't have been much past seventeen, if that. "I *beg* your pardon?"

"Now take Trotsky," I said. "There was a boy you could learn something from. Yes, *sir*. He had the right slant, that boy."

The kid's expression said he was smelling something stronger than toadstools. "Such as?" he snapped coldly.

"Search me. I'm a States Rights man myself." I indicated the cage. "How's about cranking this thing up to the fourth floor?"

He closed the book, leaving a finger in to mark his place. "Whom did you wish to see?"

"You figure on announcing me?"

He sighed, registering patience. "No, sir. That's the offices of Anton & Porkov. They're closed."

"This time of day? What will the stockholders say?"

He came close to saying what was on his mind, but changed it at the last moment. "Mr. Ritter hasn't come back from lunch yet."

"What about the rest of the help?"

"There is no one else, sir. Only Mr. Ritter."

"Certainly no way to run a business. Where does Luke have lunch? At Chambord's?"

"No, sir. At the Eagle Bar & Grill. Around the corner, on Twelfth Avenue."

I was turning away when he added: "And for your information, sir, Leon Trotsky was a counter-revolutionary, a tool of Wall Street, a reactionary and a jerk. Good afternoon."

I was halfway to Twelfth Avenue before I thought of an answer to that.

V.

There was the smell of beer and steam-table cuisine, but not much light. I stepped inside and waited until my eyes adjusted to the dim interior. Four men were grouped at the bar discussing something with the man in the white apron, and further down the room another man in a crumpled seersucker suit sat at a small round table wolfing down a sandwich. A tired-looking blonde waitress was folding napkins in a booth at the rear of the room. I leaned across the bar and, during a sudden silence, beckoned to the apron. "I'm looking for Mr. Ritter."

A thumb indicated the man at the table. The silence continued while I walked back there and swung a chair around and sat down across from him. His head snapped up and I was looked at out of a pair of narrow dark eyes set in an uneven face that seemed mostly jaw.

"Mr. Ritter?"

". . . What about it?"

I said, "We can't talk here.

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Let's go up to your office."

He said, "Hah!" and bit into his sandwich and put what was left of it down on the plate and leaned back and chewed slowly, with a kind of circular motion. "What we got to talk about?"

"Not here," I said again. "You never know who's listening."

"I don't know you. What's your name?"

"My name wouldn't mean a thing to you, Mr. Ritter. Let's say I'm an old friend of Maurice Anton's."

His jaws ground to a halt and for a moment he seemed not to be breathing. Then he took a slow careful breath and his hands slid off the table and dropped to his knees. "Maurice, hunh?" he grunted. "Well, well. And how is Maurice these days?"

"He hasn't been getting around much," I said. "They buried him four months ago."

He went on staring at me without expression. The waitress got out of the booth and carried the folded napkins over to the bar. Ritter brought up a hand and picked up the heavy water glass beside his plate and emptied it down his throat. When he set it down again he kept his stubby fingers around it.

"Like I said, mister," he growled, "I don't know you. You got something to say, say it here. Otherwise, beat it."

I lifted an eyebrow. "That's no way to talk to a customer, Luke. Let's go up to your office."

"Customer, hell! You smell like a cop to me!"

There was no point in wasting any more time. I moved my hand and the .45 was in it, down low, the muzzle resting on the edge of the table and pointed at him. "Your office, Ritter," I said very quietly.

His whole body twitched spasmodically, then seemed to freeze. Behind me the voices went on at the bar. Ritter's eyes were glued to the gun and his heavy jaw sagged slightly.

"You can stand up now," I murmured. "Then you walk on out the door and straight to 774. I'll be riding in your hip pocket all the way; one wrong move and you'll have bullets for dessert. Get going!"

He wet his lips, still staring at the gun, and started to get up — and an arm and a pair of female breasts came between us. That goddam waitress.

She got as far as "Will that be — ?" before Ritter grabbed her with one hand and threw the water glass at my head with the other. I ducked in time, but my gun was useless with the girl between us. Glass broke, somebody cursed, the blonde screamed — and I moved.

I bent and grabbed Ritter's ankle and yanked. He fell straight

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back, taking the girl with him in a flurry of suntan stockings and white thighs. I tried shoving her aside to ram the .45 against Ritter's ribs, and he clawed out blindly, trying to hold her, caught the neckline of her apron and ripped it and the brassiere beneath completely away. This being July she had dressed for comfort; and any lingering doubt over her being a true blonde was gone forever.

The blonde let out a screech that rattled the glassware and tried to get out from under. Somebody plowed into me from behind and I rammed against her, both of us crashing down on Ritter. I lost the .45 when my hand hit a chair leg, and a second later I was buried under an avalanche of humanity.

Fists, feet and knees banged into me from all angles. I managed to turn on my back and draw my knees up, then snapped my feet into the barman's belly, like the handsome hero of a Western, and threw him halfway across the room into a pinball machine.

It let me get to my feet. Ritter was running for the door, the blonde was trying to crawl under a table, giving me a view of her I would never forget, and facing me were the four guys I had first seen at the bar.

No sound but heavy breathing. The screen door banged behind Ritter. The barman began slowly to untangle himself from the ruins of the pinball machine, like a fly pulling loose from a sheet of Tanglefoot.

I said, "Get the hell out of my way," and walked straight at the four of them. The one in front of me looked plenty tough. He put up his fists in the standard boxing position and came up on the balls of his feet and took a couple of dancing steps toward me. I said, "You look a little pale to be Joe Louis," and slammed a hard right to his chin. He fell straight forward and I sidestepped and caught the next man by his belt and shirtfront and threw him into the pyramided bottles and mirror behind the bar. It sounded like Libby-Owens blowing up.

The remaining pair goggled at me and got out of the way. Not the barman, though. He took one look at the wreckage behind the bar, let out a bellow of rage and pain and charged me head-down. I stepped aside and put out my foot. He tripped and went sprawling into the booth where the blonde was crouched, landing squarely on top of her. I hoped they both would be very happy.

I scooped my gun off the floor and headed for the front door. Just as I got there a blue uniform pushed through a knot of spectators gathered outside and opened the screen. One of New York's finest — big and wide and handsome. He took one look at the gun

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in my fist and reached for his holster. I yelled and jumped forward and nailed him on the side of the jaw. The blow spun him in a limp circle and he fell halfway into an open phone booth. A few of the hardier members of the mob outside let out a yell and started to come in after me, but sight of the gun melted them like snow in Death Valley. I realized, however, that leaving by the front door would be foolish at best, and more than likely ruinous. That left the back way, if there was one, and I headed in that direction.

A swinging door let me into a combination store room and kitchen, with a bolted door off that. I shot the bolts and opened the door and stuck my head out for a cautious look around. A narrow alley, crowded with torn papers, overflowing garbage cans and big fat blue-bottle flies buzzing in the hot sun. The stink would have taken top honors from a family of skunks, but it was nothing I couldn't live through.

Nobody in sight. I slid the gun back under my arm and trotted along the uneven bricks toward Eleventh Avenue, a block to the east, past loading platforms and the rear entrances to the buildings fronting on Thirty-first Street. Most of them had street numbers chalked up for the benefit of delivery men, and my mind was already made up by the time I reached 774.

A sagging wooden door with four glass panels, three of them broken, the fourth coated with dust and cobwebs. There had been a lock on it once, but that was a long time ago. I peered through one of the broken panes. A dim and dusty corridor led toward the front of the building, with a closed door at the far end.

There was no time for advance planning. Any moment now cops would be pouring into the alleyway with blood in their eyes and guns in their hands. I pushed the door open, getting a complaining groan from rusty hinges, closed it carefully behind me and went quickly along the passageway to the inner door. I listened for a long moment, heard nothing but the faraway mumble of traffic, then turned the knob and gave it a small even tug. The door swung toward me an inch or two and I put an eye to the crack.

He was still there, no more than twenty feet away, in exactly the same position, still gulping down Marx and looking as though it agreed with him.

And between us, in the same wall as the elevator, was the entrance to the building stairs.

As a cause for rejoicing it left a good deal to be desired. Getting to those stairs without the kid seeing me depended on just how strong a hold Marx had on him. Three or four steps would get me

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there, but the door had to be opened as well, not to mention the one I was standing behind. Of course, I could always shove my gun in his back, tie and gag him and dump him behind something, and use the elevator. But it would be a hell of a lot better to leave him undisturbed in case the cops came snooping around hunting for me.

I took another minute to study the kid's position. He was facing three quarters away from me, one shoulder propped against the wall, head bent over the book. To see me at all he would have to turn his head halfway around. No reason for him to turn his head unless I stumbled over my feet on the way.

It went off without a hitch. I was across the open stretch of hall and through the stairway door and had it closed again and my back against it within the space of six heartbeats. Now that it was over with, I had the feeling I could have driven an oil truck past the kid without his knowing it.

I climbed the three flights, found the door at the top unlocked and stepped into the hot dry air of a narrow hall with office doors, closed, lining both walls. None of the frosted glass panels had legends painted on them until I got down to the far end of the corridor. Three of the doors there, side by side, had the words "Anton & Porkov — Importers" painted on them in black, with the additional word "Entrance" on the one in the center.

I was standing there eyeing the center door and wondering if the thing to do was knock first, when a telephone suddenly shrilled behind the door on the left. I froze. A second ring broke off in the middle and the heavy voice of Luke Ritter said, "Yeah? . . . Not yet, no. . . . Any minute now. He was due in from Mexico City two hours ago. . . . I doubt it, Max. I called her but nobody answered. She probably met the plane. . . . I'll be right here."

The sound of a phone going back into its cradle. Some more silence behind the door. Then a chair creaked and another voice said, "That eye don't look any too good, Luke." It was a light, smooth voice, almost feminine.

"It hurts like hell," Ritter growled. "I'd like to get my hands on that bastard for about one minute. One minute's all I'd need!"

"You make him for a cop?"

"Naw. A cop would've pushed his badge at me. I figure him for a private dick trying to get a line on Porkov. He'll hear about it when he calls me."

"Any chance of the guy showing up here?"

A dry short laugh. "I sure as hell hope so, brother. The minute

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he walks into the lobby, the punk downstairs will ring our private buzzer. That's all the notice I want!"

I went on down to the third of the three doors marked Anton & Porkov and tried the knob. Locked. Nothing was easy for me today. This was an old door, fitting the frame loosely after many years. I reached in behind my display handkerchief and got out the nail file I carried there. It was thin enough for my purpose; I hoped it would be long enough. By pressing the knob hard away from the jamb I was able to slip the point of the file against the slope of the spring lock. It moved slightly, then snapped back with a light, almost inaudible, click. I opened the door. Nothing moved inside. I stepped through and closed it tenderly behind me.

It was a large square room, dim in the afternoon light filtering through a single unwashed window. Heavy wooden packing cases were stacked to the ceiling in two of the corners. A roll-top desk held a clutter of invoices, bills and loose papers. A communicating door was unlocked and I passed through it into the center office. This one held metal files, a desk with a typewriter on the shelf, several chairs, a washstand behind a black lacquered screen in one corner. I could smell dust and, very faintly, a touch of cologne. Another door, closed, led to the first office, with the murmur of voices straining through it.

I went over to it, making sure my shadow wouldn't appear on the pebbled glass. The voices went on mumbling. The .45 came out, cool and comforting against my palm. I began a slow turning of the doorknob, the way they take the fuse out of a blockbuster. The door gave just enough to tell me what I wanted to know.

I slammed it all the way open with a hard movement of my knee and said, "Merry Christmas, you sons-a-bitches!"

That was as far as I got. Luke Ritter was behind a desk, tilted back in a swivel chair and looking at me with a twisted grin. He was alone. Even as I realized he couldn't be alone, something swished through the air behind me and the room exploded into a pain-filled void of stars. I felt myself falling as from a great height, then the stars were gone and nothing was left.

VI

Water trickled down my face and under my collar. I swam up from the depths into a pale green world of twisted shapes. Another wave of water poured over me and I sneezed suddenly, sending a lance of pain through my head.

I opened my eyes. I was flat on my back. Up above me floated a pair of pale balloons with gro-

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tesque faces painted on them. I blinked a time or two before my eyes focused, and then the balloons were faces after all. The familiar undershot jaw, slept-in features and dark eyes belonged to Luke Ritter; but the other was a pale cameo of delicate perfection, the face of a dreamer, a poet, a faerie prince. Eyes of azure blue widened appealingly, perfect lips parted to show beautiful teeth and a voice like muted viol strings said, "You want I should rough him up some more, Luke?"

"You did fine, Nekko," Ritter said. He drew back his foot and slammed his toe into my ribs. "All right, snoop. Up you go."

I rolled over and got both knees and one hand under me and tried to stand up. My head weighed a ton and was as tender as a ten-dollar steak. A hand came down and took hold of my hair and lifted me three feet in the air. The pain almost caused me to black out a second time. The edge of a chair hit me under the knees and I sat down, hard. The room moved around a time or two, then lurched to a stop. It looked only slightly better that way.

I could see my gun over on a corner of the desk, much too far away to reach by any sudden move on my part. Ritter gave me a cold smile and went around behind the desk and sat down in the swivel chair. He reached out, lifted the .45 by its trigger guard, swung it idly back and forth between thumb and forefinger and looked at me over it.

"You're kind of a secretive guy, mister," he grumbled. "I kind of went through your wallet while you were sleeping. Some money, but no identification. Just who the aching Jesus you supposed to be?"

"The name's Trotsky," I said. "My friends call me Cutie-pie."

Ritter stopped swinging the gun and lifted a corner of his lip. "Nekko," he said quietly.

A small hard fist came out of nowhere and hit me under the right eye. It hurt, but not enough to get excited about. I turned my head far enough to look at the beautiful young man called Nekko. I said, "Hello, honey. How're the boys down at the Turkish bath?"

His flawless complexion turned scarlet. He lashed out at me again but I moved my head quickly and he missed. He tried again, instantly, but his rage made him careless and he got too close to me. I lifted my foot hard and caught him squarely in the crotch. He screamed like a woman and fell over a chair.

Ritter bounded to his feet, came quickly around the desk and hit me high on the cheek with a straight left. No one had ever hit me harder in my life. My chair went over backwards with me in it. The back of my head hit the

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carpet and the light from the desk lamp blurred in my eyes. Ritter, his mouth twisting in a snarl, followed me down, trying to hit me again, this time with the gun. I took a glancing blow on the shoulder and grabbed the gun hand and tried to bite it off at the wrist. He slammed a fist into my throat and I vomited against the front of his shirt. That was when I got the barrel of the .45 behind my left ear and I went to sleep again. . . .

When I opened my eyes I was back in the same chair. Ritter was over behind the desk mopping his shirt front with a wet handkerchief and swearing in a monotonous undertone that sounded like the buzz of a rattler. Nekko sat in a straight-backed chair tilted against the wall. His azure eyes stared at me with distilled hate through a veil of blue cigarette smoke. A good deal more important was the short-barrelled .32 revolver he was holding against his thigh.

My head felt like a busted appendix and my throat wasn't any improvement. I sat there and caught up on my breathing and thought bitter thoughts. The room was ominously quiet.

Ritter finally threw the handkerchief savagely into a wastebasket and lifted his eyes to me. "Let's try it again," he snarled. "Give me your name."

"Take it," I said. "I can always get another."

"You come busting in here with a gun, smart guy. All I got to do is call in the cops and you end up behind bars."

"Ha ha," I said.

He stood up casually and came over to me and swung the back of his hand against my face. I rolled with the blow but that didn't help much. I tried to kick him in the shin but missed and it earned me another belt in the face. I felt my teeth cut into the inner surface of my cheek and the salt taste of blood filled my mouth.

Nekko slid out of his chair and jabbed the .32 against the back of my neck. Ritter bent down until his face was inches from mine. His breath was the reason they'd invented chlorophyll.

"Your name, you son of a bitch!"

I spat a mouthful of blood squarely into his eyes. He bellowed like a branded bull and swung a punch that started from the floor. Even though Nekko's gun was boring into my neck I jerked my head aside. The fist whistled past my ear and knocked Nekko's gun clear across the room.

It was my chance — maybe the last one I'd get. Before Ritter could recover his balance I slammed a shoulder into his gut and knocked him across the desk. Nekko was already across the

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room, bending to pick up the gun. I picked up the chair and threw it. It caught him in the ribs and spun him against a filing case. I jumped for the gun, snatched it up and turned, just as Nekko, his small white even teeth gleaming behind a crazed snarl, sprang at me. I took one step back and hammered the gun barrel full into his half-open mouth. He sprayed broken teeth like a fountain and his scream was half gurgle from the blood filling his mouth. He staggered back a few steps clutching his face, then collapsed into a sobbing heap.

I wheeled, just in time to see Ritter leveling my own gun at me from the opposite side of the desk. The look on his face told me he meant to blast me down and worry about the consequences afterward.

The .32 jumped in my hand with a spiteful *crack*. A red flower seemed to blossom under Ritter's left eye. The .45 dropped from his extended hand and bounced once on the blotter. Ritter turned in a slow half circle, took a wavering step going nowhere, then fell like the First National Bank.

I stood there, listening. Doors didn't slam, no feet came running down the hall, no one yelled for the police. Evidently the rest of the fourth floor was deserted, and from any place else that single shot could have been the slamming of a distant door or the filtered backfire from a car. The only sound was the bubbling sobs from the crumpled and no longer beautiful man known as Nekko.

I went behind the desk and looked at Ritter. He was as dead as Diogenes. I picked up the .45 and slipped it back under my arm and came back to where Nekko lay. Picking him up was like picking up a bucket of mush. I flopped him into a chair and took a handful of his wavy blond hair and shook him.

"Arleen Farmer," I said. "Where do I find her?"

His mouth dripped crimson like a fresh wound. The shattered stumps of teeth winked through the red. A vague mumble ground its way into the open. His eyes were completely mad.

I gave his head another shake. "Arleen Farmer," I said again. "Where is she?" I slapped him across the face and wiped the blood on his coat. "Talk, damn you!"

". . . do'n' know . . ."

I hit him squarely in the nose. More blood spurted. His eyes rolled up and he fell off the chair. I kicked him full in the mouth. Even the stumps went this time. I tore off his necktie and bound his hands behind his back and left him lying there. My only hope was to find an address book that might give me additional leads to the kidnapers of my wife.

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I stepped over what was left of Luke Ritter and started through the desk drawers. I was halfway through the junk in the center one when the phone rang.

VII

I stood there staring at the phone under the cone of light from the desk lamp. It rang a second time before I reached out and took up the receiver. "Yeah," I said, trying to pitch my voice to the same dull rumble I'd heard Ritter use.

A soft feminine drawl came over the wire. "Luke? Did Max call you?"

My fingers tightened against the hard rubber and my lips pulled back into an aching grimace. It was the voice of the blonde responsible for snatching my wife. I fought down a wave of pure fury and said, "Yeah. A while ago."

"All right," the soft voice went on. "When he calls back, tell him Sergi wants the woman brought to his apartment at ten o'clock tonight. Use the rear entrance and the service elevator. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"That's all." A click at the other end told me I was alone.

I put down the instrument with slow care, suddenly aware that my hands were shaking slightly. Ten o'clock. I looked at my strap-watch. Six hours yet. Either I had to find out just who this "Max" was and where he had my wife, or I must wait all those hours before I could do anything about getting her back.

A liquid groan reached my ears from across the room. I looked up in time to see Nekko moving weakly on the floor like a dying insect. I walked over and caught him by the collar and yanked him to his feet. "Last chance, sweetheart," I said. "Where do I find Max?"

He hung there, his eyes glazed, his mouth slack, and said nothing. I brought up the .32 and raked the sight across one cheek, laying it open to the bone. "Give, damn you! Where do I find Max?"

Pain took the vacant look from his eyes and brought a groan from his tortured lungs. The battered lips writhed, forming words that were too faint and indistinct for me to interpret. I put my ear close to his mouth. "Tell me again."

". . . warehouse . . . full . . . radio . . ."

Bright blood came spilling from his mouth and he went slack in my grasp. I stared at the blood, realizing it was arterial blood. Something had given way inside of him from the treatment he had taken; perhaps a broken rib had punctured a lung as the result of his being hit by the thrown chair.

He died in my hands. I let the

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body slip to the floor and went back to the desk. Nekko's last words had been too vague to be useful. "A warehouse full of radios" could have meant anything. I tackled the desk again, looking for a lead.

At the end of half an hour I had gone through those three offices as thoroughly as it is possible to go through anything. No file of private phone numbers, no personal papers of any kind. Only a lot of bills of lading, invoices, etc., on miscellaneous merchandise being shipped abroad.

I was at the washbasin in the center office when the phone rang again. Before it could ring a second time I was in there and lifting the receiver. I took a slow breath and said, "Max?"

"Yeah, Luke." Nothing distinctive about the voice. "You hear from Porkov?"

"Bring her to his apartment. Ten tonight." I tried desperately to think of a question that would help me and not make him suspicious. The slightest doubt in his mind could ruin everything. But before I could come up with something, the voice said, "Check," and I was holding a dead wire.

I returned to the center office and looked at my face in the mirror over the washbasin. There was a bruise on my right cheek and a slight discoloration under one eye. I rinsed the taste of blood from my mouth, washed a few evil-smelling spots from my coat lapel and went back to wipe fingerprints off the furniture and the file cabinets. The two dead men lay where they had fallen. Sight of the man called Nekko brought his words back to me. "Warehouse full of radios." It was entirely possible that Lodi was being held in some warehouse, but the fact that there were radios in that warehouse was no help at all.

A faint memory nagged at the back of my brain. Somewhere in Nekko's last words was a key — a key that tied in with a piece of information I had picked up during the day. I went over it again, word by word. "Warehouse" . . . a blank. "Full" . . . just as blank. "Radios" . . . I frowned. Was it "radios" or "radio"? All right, so it was one radio. That made no more sense than —

And then the missing piece fell into place. Eddie Treeglos had told me earlier in the day that Ann Fullerton had died in a fire at a radio company — the *Fullbright* Radio Company!

I grabbed the Manhattan telephone directory and leafed through to the right page. No listing for Fullbright Radio. The classified directory drew the same blank. But there had to be a — wait! The company was supposed to have burned out; the fire that

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had "killed" Ann Fullerton.

I dialed Eddie Treeglos. "Eddie, that Fullbright Radio outfit you told me about. I can't find them listed in the latest phone books. See what you can find. I'll hang on."

He came back almost immediately. "1220 Huber Street. A few blocks below Canal Street. 1220 would be damn near in the Hudson River."

I put back the receiver, used my handkerchief to wipe away the prints and went out into the corridor. Nobody around. I took the stairs to the third floor, stopped off there and rang for the elevator. The moment I heard the heavy door clang shut on the first floor, I trotted down the steps. The cage was still up there when I went out the front door to the street.

My watch showed the time as 4:45 and the sun was still high and still hot. I walked back through the heat and the stink to where I had left the convertible. It was still there and still intact. Considering the neighborhood, it could have been otherwise. I got in and drove on down to Huber Street.

VIII

It was a small narrow building of ancient red brick crammed in between a cold storage warehouse and a moving and van outfit. The front entrance was boarded up and the smoke-grimed bricks told the story. A wooden sign below the broken second-floor windows read: Fullbright Radio Corp. It looked about ready to fall into the street.

I drove on by and turned the corner. Halfway along was the entrance to an alley. I parked well above it and got out. Sunlight glittered on the river's oily swell across the way. A pair of piers jutted out into the water, pointed like daggers at the Jersey shore. In one of the slips a rusty freighter stood high out of the water, its hold empty of cargo. The reek of hot tar made my nose twitch in protest.

A few doors above the alley was a hole-in-the-wall smoke shop with two shirt-sleeved men in front of it consulting a racing form. I walked past them, turning my head to look at a sunbleached advertisement for La Palina cigars in the window. The two men didn't look up. I would have had to eat oats and run five-and-a-half furlongs in 1:03 first.

This alley was cleaner than my last one. Wire refuse containers were piled high with empty cartons and there was the clean odor of excelsior. A panel truck was backed up to the loading platform of the cold storage plant, but the driver was nowhere in sight. A few steps more and the fire-blackened rear of the Fullbright Radio Cor-

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poration was where I could reach it.

Two windows on either side of a strong-looking door. The windows still had their glass and bars besides, and the door had a new look. I went over and leaned against it and delicately tried the latch. My first break. It was unlocked.

After a long succession of bad breaks, a good one makes you suspicious. I chewed a lip, hesitating. I looked both ways along the alley. Empty as a campaign promise. I let the door swing inward a foot or two and peered through. A big room that went all the way to the front of the building, strewn with fire-blackened timbers, wrecked partitions and charred furniture. The acrid odor found after a building burns, no matter how long after, bit into my lungs. I stepped inside and closed the door, breathing lightly, and looked around. A warped metal door in one of the side walls had a floor indicator over it, but I was reasonably sure the elevator would be out of order. Even if it wasn't, the sound would alarm anybody in the place — and I didn't want to alarm anybody. Not even me.

I picked my way gingerly through the wreckage until I was nearly to the front of the building. A narrow staircase hugged one wall, its bannister sagging. What had once been a strip of carpeting covering treads and risers was now little more than flame-chewed threads.

It looked strong enough. I went up one flight, using the balls of my feet only and staying close to the wall. At the top things looked much better than they had downstairs, although the smell was as strong. There was a line of wooden and glass partitions, with a desk, a filing case and three chairs in each where the salesmen took orders from wholesalers. Or so I figured it out. The glass on several of the partitions was broken, but that was the only damage.

I prowled the entire floor and found no sign of life. I moved quietly, opening doors without a sound and closing them the same way. Nothing.

The third floor was split by a wooden partition that extended clear to the ceiling. The half I was in had been completely cleared out, leaving bare boards and a layer of dust you could write your name in if there was nothing better to do. I stood at the top of the steps and eyed a closed door in that partition. I could see no reason for the door being closed. You have a fire and the boys with the ladders and the gleaming axes come and put out the flames and hack a few holes and go away. Then you haul out what is left and move it down the stairs and away and that's all there is to it.

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Why go around closing doors?

I took out my gun and went over to the door. No sound came through it. I turned the knob slowly and pushed it open carefully. Not very far open. Just far enough to see the broad back of a man playing solitaire at a table under a shaded light globe hanging from a ceiling cord.

Against a side wall was a daybed and on the bed, her back to me, lay a woman fully dressed. I didn't need to see her face. It was Lodi. Lodi, whose beauty of face and figure was beyond the dreams of man once that initial shock had passed. Lodi, whose secret I had managed to keep from the prying eyes of the civilized world; Lodi, who had given up so much to be with the man she loved.

I slipped into the room and came silently up behind the man at the table. He laid a black seven on a red eight with clumsy care, studied the next card in the pile, then peeled three more from those in his hand.

I said, "You could use the ace of clubs."

He jumped a foot and started to rise. I hit him on the back of the head with the gun barrel and he fell face down on the table, out cold.

"Karl!"

Lodi was struggling to sit up, her arms tied at her back. I went over and tore away the ropes and gathered her into my arms and kissed her until she was breathless.

"What have they done to you?" I demanded finally.

She shook her head, fighting back both tears and laughter. Her long dark hair needed a comb, but for my money it had never looked lovelier. "Nothing really, Karl. They were stunned, of course, when they saw my face for the first time. I think they were even a little in awe of me. They made me get dressed and brought me directly here."

"How many of them actually saw you?"

"What does it matter, darling?" She shivered. "Let's leave this horrible place. They'll be —"

"No," I said. "I've got to know."

"Four, Karl. The blonde girl and those two strange men with her and the man you found here."

"They ask you questions?"

She shrugged. "Something about a machine, and they seemed to know about the rays. At least the girl did. I pretended I couldn't understand her."

My own gun was back under my arm. I took the late Mr. Nekko's .32 out of my coat pocket and said, "Wait for me at the top of the stairs, Lodi. I've got a matter to take care of before I leave."

Her luminous eyes were trou-

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bled. "You're not going to kill him, Karl?"

"He saw you," I said flatly.

"But people will find out some day, darling. They're bound to. You can't go around —"

Her voice faltered and broke. She was staring past me, fear suddenly filling her eyes. A voice said, "Let the gun fall, my friend."

The .32 dropped from my hand and I turned slowly. It wasn't the guard after all. Standing in the doorway were the same two men who had accompanied the blonde to my home the night before. Both were holding guns.

I said, "Relax," and showed them my empty hands. The slim one gestured at the man lying half across the table and said, "Wake him up, Stephan." There was a faintly foreign sound to the words.

The burly one of the pair lowered his gun and started toward the table. The other said in the same bored tone, "Turn around, both of you," to Lodi and me, and allowed the gun in his hand to sag slightly.

I moved my hand and the .45 was out from under my arm and speaking with authority. The first slug struck Gregory above the nose and tore away half his head; the second one ripped the entire throat out of the guard, who had chosen that second to sit erect; the third caught Stephan as he was pulling the trigger of his own gun. Something made an angry sound past my ear and buried itself in the wall behind me with a dull *thunk*.

Blood, bodies and the smell of cordite. Lodi was swaying, her face buried in her hands. I picked up her light cape and the hat with the long heavy veil lying on a table next to the bed and said, "Get into these, quick. We'll have to move fast if we're going to leave before the cops get here."

She obeyed me numbly and we went quickly through the door and down the two flights of steps. Faces peered through the broken windows at the front of the building and somebody yelled at us.

We ran swiftly through the mounds of rubble to the rear door. I opened it and looked out. The alley appeared as empty of life as before. The panel truck was still backed up to the loading platform next door. I turned and beckoned to Lodi, and when I turned around again, five calm-faced men with drawn guns stepped from behind the truck to face us.

"Take it kind of easy, Mr. Terris," one of them said mildly. "We're government officers."

IX

The committee meeting was called for 10:00 a.m. at one of the

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hearing rooms in the Senate Building. Lodi and I got there about fifteen minutes early, escorted by a couple of extra-polite agents from the FBI.

Senator McGill was already in the waiting room outside. His mane of white hair didn't look quite as neat as usual and his heavy face was more red than florid.

He was upset enough to forget to shake hands. "Karl! My God, man, do you realize what a bad time you've given me?" He stared curiously at Lodi, who was heavily veiled, her arms covered with white gloves that ended under the sleeves of a long, high-necked dress. "Good morning, Mrs. Terris," he said, civilly enough. "I hear you've had something of a bad time of it. I do hope you're fully recovered."

"Thank you," Lodi said shortly.

He drew me to one side. "Don't hold anything back from them, Karl," he pleaded in an undertone. "They're sore as hell. Unless you can do some mighty tall explaining, you're going to be charged with everything from murder to spitting on the sidewalk! The way you were moving around, I'm surprised they even found you."

"I discovered how they did it," I said. "Granger, the FBI man I tied up out at the house, knew what car I was using. They put the license number on the police radio and some squad spotted it parked near Huber Street. There were a dozen Feds in the block ten minutes later, and the sound of shooting did the rest."

The door to the hearing room opened and a young man beckoned to us. I took Lodi by the arm and we walked in and sat down at a long table. Across from us were several dignified-looking men in conservative business suits. Two of them I already knew: Millard Cavendish, the ranking member of the AEC; and Winston Blake, a sharp-featured bantam-rooster of a man, who wore elevator shoes and sported a black-ribboned pince-nez. Blake and I had taken an instant dislike to each other the first time we met, shortly after my return from Africa, and I knew he would be out for my scalp this time for sure.

Millard Cavendish sounded a gavel and brought the meeting to order. He was a tall, thin man with deep hollows under his cheeks and a shock of iron-gray hair that kept sliding down over his high forehead. He said, "Your name is Karl Terris and you reside in Clinton Township, Catskill County, in the State of New York. Is that correct?"

I looked at the girl behind the stenotype machine and said, "That is correct."

At this point, Winston Blake, who had been staring hard at

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Lodi, cut in to say, "Mr. Cavendish, will you order this woman to remove her veil? I see no reason why she should keep her face covered during this hearing."

Before Cavendish could open his mouth, I said, "That veil stays on, Blake."

The little man bristled. "Speak when you're spoken to, sir! We're running this hearing."

"Then go ahead and run it. But the veil stays on."

Cavendish said quietly, "This is a hearing, Mr. Blake, not a style symposium. Let's get on with this, shall we?"

"I think Mr. Terris should be reminded," Blake snapped, "that it is within the province of this committee to cite a witness for contempt."

"Let's hope," I said, "that none of its members gives me a reason for being contemptuous."

Behind me somebody smothered a chuckle. Blake's face turned a fiery red. The gavel smacked its block once and Cavendish said, "Mr. Terris, you appeared before this committee some six weeks ago upon your unexpected return from Africa after an absence of two years. At the time of your disappearance you were, as a volunteer, engaged in mapping an area of French Equatorial Africa by air for the United States Government. The purpose of this aerial survey was to locate unusually rich deposits of fissionable material believed to be somewhere in that locality. Am I correct thus far?"

"Yes, sir."

"In your appearance before this committee earlier you stated, under oath, that you failed to locate such deposits, that you had no idea where, if at all, they were located, and that the photographs taken of the locality had been destroyed at the time your plane crashed. This, too, is correct?"

"Yes, sir."

Cavendish fixed me with a not unkindly eye. "Do you, at this time, wish to enlarge on that testimony?"

"No, sir."

The chairman picked up a sheet of paper from a thin sheaf next to his right elbow, studied it briefly, then put it down and looked sharply at me. "Mr. Terris," he said, "twelve days ago a Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Mather died under mysterious circumstances in the south of France. An examination showed both had died of being exposed to cosmic radiation of a highly concentrated form. Exposure took place, it has been established, between thirty and thirty-five days before their deaths. Further investigation revealed that the couple were aboard the tramp steamer *City of Stockholm* at the time of such exposure. Now, it is a matter of record that you chartered the

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City of Stockholm at the port of Dakar, in Africa, for the purpose of transporting you and your wife to America. Furthermore, the cabin you and your wife occupied during the crossing was the one occupied immediately afterward by Mr. and Mrs. Mather. An immediate investigation was made of the ship and your cabin by qualified scientists, and a faint but unmistakeable trace of radiation was found therein. By this time the radiation was far too slight to harm anyone, but the fact remains that it was found therein. In view of these facts, and in view of the purpose behind your original visit to Africa, this committee again asks if you wish to correct your previous testimony."

"No, sir."

There was a general shuffling of feet and shifting of chairs by the rest of the committee. Blake leaned toward the man to his left and whispered something in his ear. The two of them engaged Cavendish in a muttered colloquy pitched too low for me to hear, even if I had wanted to, which I didn't.

Senator McGill bent over me. "Damn it, Karl, what are you trying to pull? They've got enough evidence to pin perjury on you ten times over! This is your country; why aren't you willing to help it?"

I looked up at him. "Senator, if anyone's going to teach me patriotism, it won't be you. Now kindly get the hell away from me!"

Lodi reached over and put a gloved hand on my arm and squeezed it understandingly. Behind the heavy veil she was watching me, I knew, with deep concern.

Millard Cavendish had concluded his discussion with the rest of the committee members. He looked me directly in the eye and the lines of his face were stern.

"I have some questions to ask you, Mr. Terris. Please let me remind you that this committee is empowered to ask these questions and to demand a truthful answer to each. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly."

He nodded shortly. "I will ask you, Mr. Terris, if you brought into this country, at any time, a device or machine having to do with cosmic radiation or energy?"

"No, sir."

A wrinkle deepened between his eyes. "Then how do you explain what happened to the Mathers, and the finding of the experts who examined your cabin on the *City of Stockholm?*"

"That, Mr. Cavendish," I said, "would be a matter of conjecture on my part. I recognize this committee's right to ask me questions, but I do not believe it can demand conjectures."

The wrinkle became a frown. "Then I will ask you, sir: do you

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know how the cosmic radiation got into that cabin?"

"The question," I said, "is do I *know* how the radiation got into that cabin. The answer is no."

Winston Blake said, "This man is deliberately evasive. I say he should be cited for contempt for his last remark, and for every succeeding remark of its kind."

"Is that supposed to intimidate me?" I asked.

The gavel came down, hard. Cavendish said, "Let's keep our tempers, gentlemen. . . . Mr. Terris, while you were in Africa, did you come into contact with any device, manufactured or natural, that had to do with cosmic radiations or energy?"

"I did."

It took a moment for the reply to get a reaction. There was a sudden babble of voices behind me and the members of the committee stiffened in their chairs. Cavendish rapped several times before order was restored.

He said sternly, "As a patriotic American, Mr. Terris, you must have a sound reason for withholding such information from your country. This committee would like to hear that reason."

I said, "I yield to no one on the strength of my patriotism. But I'm not going to confuse patriotism with chauvinism. By revealing the location of the machines used in controlling and concentrating cosmic energy, I would bring death and destruction not only to a peaceful and innocent people, but to the rest of the world."

Millard Cavendish sighed. "This nation is not a warlike one, Mr. Terris. Possession of this secret, judging from what you say, would make America so powerful that no other nation, or coalition of nations, would dare launch a war."

I laughed shortly. "Secret weapons as a deterrent to war are useful only as long as they are controlled by one nation. Need I remind you that spies invariably manage to get their hands on such weapons and peddle them to other nations?"

Winston Blake said, "I'm getting tired of this nonsense." He leaned across the table and stabbed me with his chill blue eyes. "I'll put this in words of one syllable for you, Terris. We want this secret and we want it now. Either you give us the exact location of these devices, or whatever they are, or you'll be branded a traitor to your country in the eyes and ears of every one of your fellow Americans. You're a rich man, I'm told. Well, this is one time your wealth isn't going to save you."

I said, "It's fatheads like you that guarantee my silence."

His face turned a violent crimson and for a moment I thought

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he was on the verge of a stroke. "I want this man arrested!" he bellowed. "I'll show him he can't vilify a member of this body and get away —"

The banging of the gavel cut him off. Cavendish said frostily, "Mr. Blake is ready for your apology, Mr. Terris."

"Then let him earn it," I said, just as frostily. "I don't have to take that kind of talk from him or anybody else."

By this time Blake was on his feet. "I see no reason to continue questioning this witness. His reasons for refusing to turn over to us such vital information are patently the usual Communist Party line. A man like this deserves to be named a traitor — and if we can't make that stick, let him answer for his unprovoked assault on an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, as well as the brutal slaying of six men in something less than twenty-four hours."

Beside me, Lodi spoke for the first time. "Tell them what they want to know, Karl. It doesn't matter."

I stared at her, aghast. "You don't know what you're saying! Do you want your people to go through what the rest of the world has suffered? Have you forgotten what happened to them that first time?"

Her voice was firm. "You know the kind of protection my people have, Karl. Ten thousand planes couldn't find our city in hundreds of years if they didn't want to be found. Tell these men the whole story. I don't want the man I love to be hated by his own country."

I placed a hand lightly on her veil. "Do you want them to know about you? Do you want this veil stripped away for the world to see? Do you want to be laughed at, shunned, hear every so-called comedian toss off a collection of gag-lines about you?"

"It doesn't matter, Karl. Your real reason for refusing to tell them is your wish to protect me, not my people. I know that, and it must not be that way. All that does matter is your love for me."

They were listening to us. The room was silent as a morgue. I took a deep slow breath. "Is that the way you want it, Lodi?"

"Yes."

I rose from the chair and looked at the men behind the table. "Okay," I said. "I'm going to tell you a story. It's a story I want the world to hear from my lips, not to learn through a lot of distorted secondhand accounts. Bring in the newsmen and the spectators."

"We're running this, Terris," Winston Blake said coldly. "I see no reason to —"

"You're not running it now," I said. "Either I tell it my way or you can sweat turpentine and

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not get a word out of me. It's strictly up to you."

An almost invisible smile was tugging at Millard Cavendish's fine lips. He said, "I suggest a compromise. Newsmen, yes; but no spectators. Any part of Mr. Terris' story that can be a threat to our national security will not be published. Is that satisfactory to you, Mr. Terris?"

Once more I looked at Lodi. She nodded ever so slightly. I said, "Bring 'em in and let's get this over with."

It required only a few minutes before the press seats were filled. Curious eyes bored into us, but more of them were on the veiled woman next to me than anywhere else. Cavendish rapped his gavel lightly once and said, "We're ready to hear you, sir."

I stood there, bending forward slightly, one hand resting on the table. I said:

"Two years ago, I crashed my plane in an African jungle hundreds of miles from civilization. The reason for my being in that part of the world is known to everybody. I was injured in the crash and lay at the edge of a clearing for hours in great pain before I finally blacked out. When I came to, I found myself in a vast underground city, attended by the kindest, most generous people who ever lived. These people nursed me back to health and made me one of them. They trusted me, and when I fell in love with the daughter of their ruling family, they gave her to me as my wife.

"I learned the history of this race. Many thousands of years ago this race lived in four great cities on the surface of the Earth. These were cities of great beauty, of towering spires and luxurious homes. The rest of the Earth was just emerging from the Paleolithic Age, and nothing broke the peace and contentment of their lives.

"And then one day a vast armada of airships swooped down on these peaceful people. Bombs leveled the four cities and those who did not die were taken away as captives. When the enemy finally left, the few survivors sought refuge in underground caves."

Everybody in the room was hanging on my words. A few of the reporters were taking notes, but most of them simply listened with open mouths. I took a couple of steps down the room and came back and stood there, resting a hand lightly on Lodi's shoulder.

"These people I'm telling you about," I went on, "had the knowledge of great power. They knew how to harness cosmic rays — a force sufficient to blow this globe of ours into atoms. They could have constructed weapons that would make the H-bomb something, by comparison, you

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could shoot off in your fingers!

"But they used this power for more important things. With it they illuminated their caves to the brilliance of sunlight. As the centuries passed, their numbers increased until the population was back to where it had been at the time the attack had come. But they chose to remain underground, so that never again would they be attacked; and except for a few surface guards, none of them ventured out of those caves."

I paused again, this time to look at the three men across the table from me. Cavendish was leaning back in his chair, staring fixedly at my face; Blake was staring down at the pince-nez in his hand; Rasmussen, the third man, sat with his chin resting on one palm. The silence was absolute.

"One of those surface guards found me," I said. "Instead of killing me, he brought me to safety. I grew to love those people, made one of them my wife, and through her and them I knew happiness for the first time in my life.

"But there was one factor I forgot to take into consideration, gentlemen. We call it homesickness. I wanted to go back, to leave that paradise, for the doubtful benefits of what we call civilization. And against my better judgment, knowing exactly what it would mean to her, I brought Lodi with me."

I stopped long enough to pour water into a glass and drink it, then lit a cigarette and went on:

"This brings me to something I failed to mention earlier. These people had learned the secret of longevity. I knew men and women three and four hundred years old who looked and acted younger than I did!"

A murmur of astonishment and open doubt ran through the room. I kept right on talking, getting it all out before my vocal cords gave up:

"Cosmic radiations were the answer. Ages of exposure to those rays had resulted in an inherent immunity to harmful effects. Once every fourteen days each of these people exposed himself to a full charge of the energy; by doing so old age was held back. But after such exposure they gave off for a few days rays that would kill any ordinary man who came in contact with them. They knew this, of course; I was given a series of injections immediately to keep the emanations from harming me.

"There's not much left to tell you, gentlemen. Lodi went with me in my repaired plane. We landed near Dakar the following day; I chartered a ship for our trip to America. Unknown to me, however, Lodi had exposed herself to the customary charge of cosmic energy shortly before we left her people. As long as she wore the proper clothing no one would be

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harmed; but by undressing in her cabin, she left a concentration of the rays. By the time we reached this country she was no longer a threat to other people; but the Mathers were unfortunate enough to occupy the cabin too soon afterward."

I spread my hands. "Except for one more incident, that's the story. The incident concerns a group of Communist agents who learned what had caused the Mathers' deaths. They assumed I had brought back a machine that produced cosmic energy, and to force me to turn it over to them they kidnaped my wife. In getting her back, I'm afraid, a few people got hurt. It makes for a nice touch: in kidnaping my wife to force me into giving them the 'machine,' they had the machine all along!"

I sat down and knocked the ash from my cigarette gently into a tray. No one said anything for almost a minute. Then Winston Blake carefully lifted his pince-nez and placed it firmly astride his nose.

"Of all the arrant nonsense I ever heard," he snarled, "this concoction I've just listened to takes the prize. By what evolutionary freak did a race of people shoot up ahead of cave men to produce the wonders you told us about? And this air raid; I suppose it came from Saturn!"

I shook my head politely. "No, sir. From Venus. And evolution had nothing to do with the people of the caves, Mr. Blake. They came originally from Mars!"

I got out of my chair and helped Lodi to her feet. "You want proof, Mr. Blake. Then by God you'll get proof!"

Before any of them realized what was happening, I tore away the veil covering Lodi's face, then hooked my fingers under the high neckline of her dress and ripped it and the underclothing beneath completely from her lush and lovely body.

"Go ahead, you lousy ghouls," I said. "Take a good look!"

The collective gasp was like the rustling of a strong breeze. For the skin of the most beautiful woman of two worlds was a rich and luminous green!

X

It was after two o'clock by the time we drove into New York City, and by that time the newspapers were out with the story. At Lodi's insistence I stopped at a stand and bought two of them. The banner head on the *Gazette* said: HOW GREEN WAS MY MARTIAN, and the managing editor had made his bid for a salary increase by having the words printed in green ink. The *Standard* headline was less imaginative but more factual: TERRIS

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MYSTERY BRIDE FROM MARS!

We were nearly to the Westchester county line before Lodi put aside the papers and leaned back to let the air cool her burning cheeks. I said, "That's only a small sample, baby. They'll crucify you from now on."

"I don't mind, Karl. If you don't."

"You'll mind," I said. "You'd have to have the skin of a rhinoceros not to mind. To the rest of the world you're a freak and freaks pay a high price for living."

"Will it matter so much to you, Karl?"

"It won't get a chance to," I said harshly. "We're going back, Lodi. Back to your people for the rest of our lives. I've had enough of my kind; let them blow themselves to hell and I'll like it fine."

She laid one of her delicate hands over mine on the wheel. "They are your people, darling. You can't run out on them, on the responsibilities your great wealth gives you. You'd be terribly unhappy before long."

It was my turn to squeeze *her* hand. "Not as long as we're together, Lodi."

After several miles of silence, Lodi said, "At least they're not going to try to find where my people are."

"Not after they got the details of the power they'd be up against," I said. "The theory of the rest of the world will be: 'Let sleeping dogs lie'—no matter how tempted any nation gets to pull a fast one."

Shortly before five-thirty I swung off the Taconic Parkway and followed the private road on up the hill to the house. The late afternoon sun dappled the lawn through the trees and a tired breeze moved the leaves with a whispering sound. Lodi opened the car door and picked up her veil preparatory to getting out.

I said, "Forget the veil, baby. You'll never wear it again."

She smiled, the slow warm smile that had knocked me for a loop the first time I'd seen it. "You're sure you want it to be that way, Karl?"

"Absolutely."

She left it lying crumpled on the seat and we went up the porch steps together. I unlocked the front door and followed her into the entrance hall — and a tall, slender blond man stepped from behind the short wall of the dining room and pointed a gun at us.

He flashed his teeth and said, "I was beginning to think you hadn't paid the rent. Close the door, please — and keep your hands away from your body."

He looked like a Swedish diplomat, all right, and there were the three pock marks high up on his left cheek. Sergi Porkov. It couldn't have been anyone else.

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And just to wrap it up for sure, Ann Fullerton, in figured crepe silk that did a lot for her wheatfield hair, appeared in the opening behind him. She was carrying a good-sized patent-leather bag under one arm and she looked cool and neat and very, very lovely.

I started to say something but Porkov cut me off with a small gesture of the gun. From where I stood I judged it to be one of the old model Walther P-38's. Not exactly a cannon, but at the moment he didn't need a cannon. He said, "I think you had better lift your hands quite high and turn around. Both of you. Slowly."

We had a choice. We could turn around or we could refuse — and get shot down on the spot. We turned. He slithered up behind me and let a soft meaty hand prowl my body. He was smart enough to hold the gun so that it actually wasn't against me. He snaked out the .45 from under my arm, made sure it was the only weapon I carried, then went to work on Lodi. She couldn't have hidden a penknife in what she was wearing, but that didn't keep him from trying. I heard her gasp slightly a time or two, and while my muscles crawled I kept them from getting away from me.

He finally stepped back. "I think we will go up the stairs now. In case of unexpected visitors."

We went up the stairs and into the sitting room between the two master bedrooms. Porkov waved us into a couple of the lounge chairs there and then sat down on the edge of one across from Lodi and me. The Fullerton girl remained near the hall door, just standing there looking a little pale, a pinched expression around her full lips.

Lodi leaned back in her chair and folded her hands. She had the Oriental trick of turning completely impassive when things weren't going right. Porkov crossed his legs and wagged the gun carelessly at her. "Green or not," he said admiringly, "you're still the best-looking woman I've ever seen."

I said, "Maybe you'd like to change off for a night or two."

He turned his teeth on again. "It is a thought. Rather a good

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one. But I'm afraid not. No. I have other plans for your very charming and very beautiful green wife."

I said, "I'd like a cigarette."

"By all means! Perhaps your wife would like a last one also."

From the doorway Ann Fullerton said, "Sergi! You're not —"

Without turning his head he said, "Shutup! Speak when you're spoken to."

I lit a cigarette for Lodi and one for myself. My hands weren't shaking, but not because they didn't want to. I said, "So you're going to pull the string on us. I wonder why. Not for the secret 'machine,' I'm sure. You must have read all about that in the papers by this time."

He swung his crossed leg idly. "No, my friend. Not the machine. We slipped badly on that, Ann and I. No; you took the lives of six of the men associated with me. In effect, you made a fool out of me as well. This last is unforgiveable, Mr. Terris."

"Then you won't accept my apology?"

He eyed me almost admiringly. "You are a brave man, sir. I like brave men. . . . Tell me, Mr. Terris, do you love your wife?"

". . . We weren't planning on getting a divorce."

He nodded, satisfied. "I don't intend to kill you, my friend. Not, that is, unless you literally force me to — which you may very well do. It will be an interesting experiment, this — to learn if grief can drive a man to ignoring the law of self-preservation. I know it has done that to some men."

"I haven't the slightest idea," I said, "what the hell you're talking about."

He bent forward across his knee. "Killing you, sir, would accomplish nothing. As they say, your troubles would be over. Dead men feel nothing: no pain, no anguish of soul, no regrets. But when a man loses the one thing he holds most dear, something he has suffered for, endured hardship for, fought for — that loss is, to him, more horrible even than death. In your particular case, Mr. Terris, it would be your wife."

Something with cold feet walked up my spine. I bit down on my teeth, and it was almost a minute before my throat could form words. "You can't afford another mistake, Porkov. You'll take a full helping of hell if you so much as start a run in one of my wife's stockings. People who know me will tell you that."

He said, "You fascinate me, Mr. Terris," and lifted the gun and shot Lodi three times through the left breast.

Through a twisting nightmare of incredulity I watched my wife droop like a tired flower. Then

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her body sagged forward and she toppled out of the chair to form a pathetic heap on the rug. Death had been instantaneous.

I stood up the way an old, old man stands up. I started toward Porkov. I was in no hurry. I wouldn't live to reach his throat anyway. But that was where I was going.

From the doorway, Ann Fullerton took a gun out of her bag and shot Porkov through the head. Before he hit the floor she was standing over him, pulling the trigger again and again. He caught the full load and even after the gun was empty she went on pulling the trigger in a frenzy of hatred and revulsion until I took it gently out of her fingers.

She turned on me, her eyes burning, her breasts shaking, her body trembling. "I killed him, Karl. I love you! I want you! Right here! Now! Now!"

You don't explain those things. Not at the time, nor later. Nor ever. The blood sang through me and her body was hotter than any fire and mine was just as hot.

I was sitting on the bed when she came out of the shower. She was as naked as the palm of a baby's hand and she smelled of bath powder. She came over and sat down on the bed beside me and put both arms around me.

"We'll put all those other things out of our minds, Karl, darling." Her voice was like the purr of a cat. "I loved you from the first moment I saw you. We'll go away, Karl, and we'll have each other, and that will be all we'll ever want. Just us two . . ."

I didn't say anything. She got up and went over to the vanity and began to run the comb through her hair. She was what the boys who invented Valhalla were talking about. She had a body that would melt a glacier from across the street. She was everything a man wanted in a woman if all he wanted was a body.

Very slowly I reached under the pillow and took out the .45. I held it loosely in one hand and raised my head and said, "Turn around, Ann."

She turned around and saw the gun and all the color ran out of her face. "No, darling. No! I killed him, Karl. I killed the man who shot your wife. He would have killed you too. I saved your life!"

I said, "Sure, baby, you did fine," and fired twice. She caught both slugs full in the belly. I could hear them go in from clear across the room.

I put the gun down and smiled a little looking at her. I said, "The worms will love you, darling," and got up and walked over to the telephone.

I wondered what the cops would say about finding her naked that way.

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TO FIT THE CRIME

BY RICHARD MATHESON

Do you suffer from cliché-itis? Does "Hot enough for you?" chill your blood? When your neighbor tells you "That's the way it goes!" do you ache to tear him loose from his tired tongue?

In that case you'll feel a real pang of sympathy for old Iverson Lord, who died from a combination of hardening of the arteries and semantic seizures. Not because of his death; for death comes to us all. It is what lay beyond the grave for ancient Iverson that will move you to tears. For the fires of Hell are reserved for those who are most allergic to heat; and the Devil gives unto sinners tortures attuned to the most exacting taste.

I'VE BEEN murdered!" cried ancient Iverson Lord. "Brutally, foully murdered!"

"There, there," said his wife.

"Now, now," said his doctor.

"Garbage," murmured his son.

"As soon expect sympathy from mushrooms!" snarled the decaying poet. "From cabbages!"

"From kings," said his son.

The parchment face flinted momentarily, then sagged into meditative creases. "Aye, they will miss me," he sighed. "The kings of language, the emperors of the tongue, they shall know when I have passed."

The moulding scholar lay propped on a cloudbank of pillows. A peak of silken dressing gown erupted his turkey throat and head. His head was large, an eroded football with lace holes for eyes and a snapping gash of a mouth.

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Illustrator: David Stone

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He looked at them: at his wife, his daughter, his son, and his doctor. His beady suspicious eyes played about the room. He glared at the walls. "Assassins," he grumbled as the doctor estimated pulse beat from a scrawny wrist.

Iverson Lord was near ninety. His limbs were glasslike and brittle. His blood ran slow. His heartbeat was a largo drum. Only his brain hung clear and unaffected, a last soldier defending the fort against senility.

"I refuse to die," he announced, as if someone had suggested it. His face darkened. "I will not let bleak nature dim my light nor strip the jewel of being from my fingers!"

"There, there," said his wife.

"*There, there! There, there!*" rasped the poet, false teeth clicking in an outrage. "What betrayal is this! That I, who shape my words and breathe into their forms the breath of might, should be afettered to this cliché-ridden imbecile!"

Mrs. Lord submitted her delicate presence to the abuse of her husband. She strained out a peacemaking smile which played upon her faded features. She plucked feebly at mouse-grey curls.

"You're upset, Ivie dear," she said.

"Upset!" he cried. "Who would not be when set upon by gloating jackals!"

"Father," his daughter implored.

"Jackals, whose brains like sterile lumps beneath their skulls refuse to emanate the vaguest glow of insight into words." He narrowed his eyes and gave his lifelong lecture once again. "Who cannot deal with word cannot deal with thought," he said. "Who cannot deal with thought should be dealt with *mercilessly!*" He pounded a strengthless fist on the counterpane.

"You'd better save your strength," his son suggested.

The jade eyes stabbed up, demolishing. Iverson Lord curled thin lips in revulsion. "*Bug.*"

His son looked down on him. "Compose your affairs, Father," he said. "Accept. You'll find death not half bad."

"I am not dying!" howled the old poet. "You'd murder me, wouldn't you! Thug!" The ancient lips puffed out in newborn fury. "Murdered! Foully murdered!"

"Ivie dear, no one has murdered you," said his wife. "We've tried to be good to you."

"*Good!*" He grew apoplectic. "Mute good. Groveling good. *Insignificant* good. Ah! That *I* should have created the barren flesh about this bed of pain."

"Father, don't," begged his daughter.

Iverson Lord looked upon her. A look of stage indulgence flickered on his face. "So, Eunice, my bespectacled owl," he said, "I

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suppose you are as eager as the rest to view your sire in the act of perishing."

"Father, don't talk that way," begged the myopic Eunice.

"What way, my tooth-ridden gobbler—my erupted Venus? In literate English? Yes, perhaps that does put rather a strain on your embalmed faculties."

Eunice blinked. She accepted.

"What will you do, child," inquired Iverson Lord, "when I am taken from you? Who will speak to you? Indeed, who will even look?" The old eyes glittered a *coup de grâce*. "Let there be no equivocation, my dear," he said gently. "You are ugly in the extreme."

"Ivie dear," pleaded Mrs. Lord.

"Leave her alone!" said Alfred Lord. "Must you destroy everything before you leave?"

Iverson Lord raised a hackle. "*You*," he intoned, darting a fanged glance. "Mental vandal. Desecrator of the mind. Defacing your birthright in the name of business. Pouring your honored blood into the sewers of commerciality."

His stale breath fluttered harshly. "Groveler before checkbooks. Scraper before bank accounts."

His voice strained into grating falsetto. "*No*, madame. *Assuredly*, madame. I kiss your fat, unwholesome mind, *madame!*"

Alfred Lord smiled now, content to let the barrages of his father fall upon himself. "Let me remind you," he said, "of the importance of the profit system."

"Profit system!" exploded his sire. "Jungle system!"

"Supply and demand," said Alfred Lord.

"Alfred, don't," Eunice cautioned.

Too late to prevent venous eyeballs from threatening to discharge from their sockets. "Judas of the brain!" screamed the poet. "Boy scout of intellect! *Aaah!*"

"I pain to mention it," Alfred Lord still dropped coals, "but even a businessman may, tentatively, accept Christianity."

"Christianity!" snapped the jaded near-corpse, losing aim in his fury. "Outmoded bag of long-suffering beans! Better the lions had eaten all of them and saved the world from a bad bargain!"

"That will do, Iverson," said the doctor. "Calm yourself."

"You're upset, Ivie," said his wife. "Alfred, you mustn't upset your father."

Iverson Lord's dulling eyes flicked up final lashes of scorn at his fifty-year whipping post. "My wife's capacity for intelligible discourse," he said, "is about that of primordial gelatine. Her crowning virtue is stupidity."

He patted her bowed head with a smile. "My dear," he said, "you are nothing. You are absolutely nothing."

Mrs. Lord pressed white fingers

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to her cheek. "You're upset, Ivie," her frail voice spoke. "You don't mean it."

The old man sagged back, dejected. "This is my penitence," he said. "To live with this woman who knows so little of words she cannot tell insult from praise."

The doctor beckoned to the poet's family. They moved from the bed toward the fireplace.

"That's right," moaned the rotting scholar. "Desert me. Leave me to the rats. I am to perish sans pity, sans hope, sans all. This is my legacy! To all semantic drudges: irreverence, intolerance, and a generation of unbridled dismay!"

The three survivors stood before the crackling flames.

"He's disappointed," said the son. "He expected to live forever."

"He *will* live forever," Eunice emoted. "He is a great man."

"He's a little man," said Alfred Lord, "who is trying to get even with nature for reducing his excellence to usual dust."

"Alfred," admonished his mother, "your father is old. And . . . he's afraid."

"Afraid? Perhaps. Great? No. Every spoken cruelty, every deception and selfishness has reduced his greatness. Right now he's an old, dying crank."

Then they heard Iverson Lord. "Sweep her away!" howled the sinking poet. "Whip her away with ninetails of eternal life!"

The doctor was trying to capture the wildly flailing wrist.

"Arrest her!" yelled Iverson Lord. "Let her not embrace me as her lover! Avaunt—black, foul-faced strumpet!"

His breath escaped like faltering steam as the old man collapsed back on his pillow. His lips formed soundless, never-to-be-known quatrains. His gaze fused to the ceiling. His hands twitched out a last palsied gesture of defiance. Then he stared at the ceiling until the doctor reached adjusting fingers.

The doctor said, "It's over."

Mrs. Lord gasped. "No," she wept. She could not believe.

Eunice did not weep. "He is with the angels now," she said.

"Let justice be done," said the son of dead Iverson Lord.

It was a grey place.

No flames. No licking smoke. No pallor of doom obscured his sight. Only grey—mediocre grey—unrelieved grey.

Iverson Lord strode through the grey place.

"The absence of retributive heat and leak-eyed, wailing souls is preeminently encouraging," he said to himself.

Striding on. Through a long grey hall.

"After-life," he mused. "So all is not symbolic applesauce as once I had suspected."

Another hallway angled in. A man came walking out briskly.

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He joined the scholar. He clapped him smartly on the shoulder.

"Greetings, gate!" said the man.

Iverson Lord looked down his mobile Grecian nose.

"I beg your pardon," he said, distaste wrinkling his words.

"What do you know?" said the man. "How's life treating you? What do you know and what do you say?"

The semanticist drew back askance. The man forged on, arms and legs pumping mightily.

"What's new?" he was saying. "Give me the lowdown. Give me the dirt."

Two side halls. The man buzzed into one grey length. Another man appeared. He walked beside Iverson Lord. The poet looked at him narrowly. The man smiled broadly.

"Nice day, isn't it?"

"What place is this?" asked Iverson Lord.

"Nice weather we're having."

"I ask, what place is this?"

"Looks like it might turn out nice."

"Craven!" snapped Iverson Lord, stopping in his tracks. "Answer me!"

The man said, "Everybody complains about the weather, but nobody—"

"Silence!"

The semanticist watched the man turn into a side hallway. He shook his head. "Grotesque mummery," he said.

Another man appeared.

"Hi, you!" cried Iverson Lord. He ran. He clutched the man's grey sleeve. "What place is this?"

"You don't say?" said the man.

"You will answer me, sirrah!"

"Is that a fact?"

The poet sprayed wrath upon the man. His eyes popped. He grabbed the man's grey lapels. "You shall give intelligence or I shall throttle you!" he cried.

"Honest?"

Iverson Lord gaped. "What density is this?" he spoke incredulously. "Is this a man or a vegetable in my hands?"

"Well, knock me down and pick me up," said the man.

Something barren and chilling gripped the poet. He drew back, muttering in fear. He backed up.

Into an enormous room. Grey.

Voices chattered. All alike.

"It's swell here," said a voice. "It isn't black as pitch."

"It isn't cold as ice," said another.

The poet's eyes snapped about in confused fury. He saw blurred forms—seated, standing, reclining. He backed into a grey wall.

"It isn't mean as sin," a voice said.

"It isn't raining cats and dogs," said another.

"Avaunt." The ancient lips framed automatically. "I say—"

"Gee whiz, but it's super dandy swellelegant!" a voice laughed.

(*Continued on page 147*)

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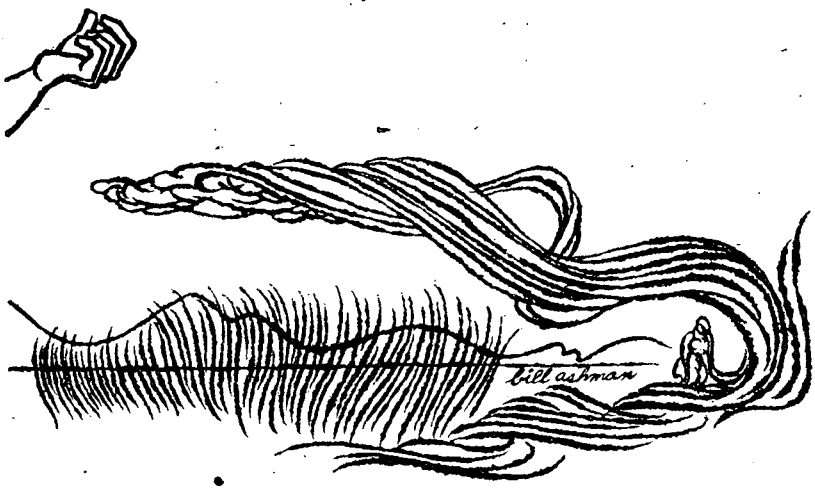
FINAL EXAM

BY CHAD OLIVER



"The other planets? They're right up there in plain sight, just waiting for us to take over. I'll grant you we got a few problems to lick before we get there. We need the right fuel and enough speed to go millions of miles in a hurry. But we'll make it. Why not? Man's the smartest animal in the Universe!

"And once we lick the transportation problem, Mars and Venus and Saturn will be our meat. Sure, the natives may be a little put out. Natives have been put out before and who the hell cared? It'll be about like the Indians — and you know what happened to those *babies! I'm not saying to kill 'em off. Why, they'd probably be glad to learn our way of doing things!"*

THE chartered spacer from Marsopolis settled into Ed Crowley's private field on her antigravs, hardly disturbing a blade of the lavender grass. There was a moment of silence in the thin air — and then the students came out.

They weren't all students, of course. B. Barratt Osborne, the writer, was present, and so were a lame spaceman and his young

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son. But most of the passengers were members of Dr. Thomas La Farge's famous class in Advanced Martian History 482, the pride of the American Academy. This was their field trip.

"There's one," Charlotte Stevens said excitedly. "Look at him!"

It was a real live Martian, all right. He climbed slowly down out of a baggage truck and walked toward them. He was very tall and slender and awkward-looking — just like the pictures. His skin was reddish and he had a shock of snow-white hair. His slanted eyes were a deep and liquid green. He seemed to look through rather than at the group standing outside the ship, and he said nothing at all.

"Observe, observe," whispered Dr. Thomas La Farge. "I told you they never said anything."

"Gosh," said Charlotte Stevens.

"Look, Daddy," Bobby Fitzgerald said loudly, pulling on his father's sleeve. "Look at the funny Martian."

"Over here, my good man," Professor La Farge instructed. "The bags are on the ship. Captain Stuart will show you."

The Martian nodded and went into the ship without a word.

"That was Two," the professor explained. "As you know, they have no proper names."

"Well," sniffed Pat Somerset, smoothing her skirt over her silken legs. "He didn't seem very friendly, I *must* say."

"That's the way they are," the professor said. "They are like children."

Wilson Thorne, dressed campus-style in gray flannel slacks and plaid sport coat, peered out from behind his horn-rimmed glasses, puffed on his Sherlockian calabash pipe, and nodded wisely. You and I, Prof, his manner intimated. We understand each other.

They all piled into one of Ed Crowley's sleek transports that was parked on the side of the field. Professor La Farge knowingly pressed the destination stud and they hummed into motion. The white plastirock road cut through forests of lavender grass five feet tall, and the air was sweet with the smell of flowers.

The Ranch House, a rambling structure carved out of polished Martian redwood, nestled at the foot of a low range of purple hills. Orange flower trees dotted the hillsides. A soft breeze rustled through the grasses. To their left they could see the deserted remains of what had once been a Martian shrine.

"Gosh," said Charlotte Stevens.

"A characteristic Martian landscape," noted the professor.

"Nuts," said B. Barratt Osborne, a gentleman notoriously contemptuous of any and all sentiments not expressed to perfection by B. Barratt Osborne.

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John Fitzgerald tried to keep his bad leg out of the way and watched his son's face. Bobby was drinking it all in. It must be pretty wonderful to him, he figured. The way it had been to himself when he had first seen it.

The transport stopped precisely in front of the Ranch House.

"There's Ed Crowley," the professor said in a low voice. "Not a man of refinement by any means, but you must remember that the largest extant group of Martians is located on his property."

Ed Crowley, a rotund individual hiding behind a venomous black cigar, rolled up to the transport and waved cheerily.

"Good to see you, what I mean," he chortled in the deep, hoarse voice that signified that the great man was well into his second bottle. "Had about given you up for lost. How ya, Einstein? Good to see you."

Dr. Thomas La Farge shook his hand with simulated heartiness, and introduced his retinue. B. Barratt Osborne already knew the great man, of course. He knew everybody.

"Yes, sir," Ed Crowley growled, rubbing his hands together. "Just in time to get freshed up some and take in the native Death Dance tonight under the old twin moons. You just make yourselves right at home, what I mean. Boy!"

A Martian appeared from around a corner. He looked just like the first one to untrained eyes. And it was funny — no matter how close you stood to him, he seemed coldly far away.

"Hello, One," the professor said. "How are things?"

One nodded his head perceptibly and contributed a sum total of no statements on the state of things.

"A genu-wine Martian, what I mean," Ed Crowley said proudly. "You just take a good look at him; he don't mind. One, show these people to their rooms. Anyone care to join me in a shot of bourbon?"

"Silly question of the year," commented B. Barratt Osborne. He linked his arm in that of his host and followed the great man into the Ranch House. The others trooped off behind One, whose presence put something of a damper on the conversation. He was so *different.*

"He gives me the creeps," hissed Pat Somerset, running her slim fingers through her blonde hair.

"Shhhh!" whispered Charlotte Stevens. "He'll hear you."

"Martians sure are funny," Bobby Fitzgerald said loudly.

Wilson Thorne smoked his calabash, looked knowing, and kept close to the professor. They walked through a hall carved out of astonishing redwood and there were strange pictures on the walls. Outside, as a pale sun floated down behind the Martian hills,

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the long evening shadows crept through the tall grasses and the wind turned cold out of the north.

After they had dressed and put on warm jackets, John Fitzgerald and his son left their room and went to rejoin the others. Silver lamps hung from cross beams and turned the redwood halls a deep golden brown. The dark paintings withdrew into the shadows and waited with an old, old patience.

"What happened to the Martians, Daddy?" Bobby asked, his bright blue eyes shining in his freshly scrubbed face.

"*We* happened to the Martians."

"I think they're funny. Why did we kill them?"

"We didn't kill them . . . exactly. Oh, there were some of them that tried to fight, but they didn't have anything to fight with; no guns, no ships, nothing. Disease got most of them, and nobody knows what happened to the rest. They just disappeared."

"Why?"

"I think maybe they had a crystal ball, son."

John Fitzgerald tried not to limp as they entered the brightly lighted living room where the others were. He felt vaguely out of place here, even more so than at Marsopolis.

He noticed that Pat Somerset had changed into a black satin dress — evidently her idea of just the thing for a Martian field trip. She was giving him the eye, as usual, and he tried not to laugh. Charlotte Stevens was listening enraptured to Ed Crowley, who was exercising his host's prerogative of talking loud and long.

"When I first came to Mars there wasn't a first-class bar this side of Marsopolis," the great man announced. "Strictly for the birds, what I mean. Just a bunch of spacemen — no offense, Mr. Fitzgerald — and scenery. Me, I took this part of the old planet over and made it into a tourist's paradise. Swimming, night rides under the moons of Mars, fishing in the cold mountain streams, all that junk. Educational, too, what with the old brick piles and Martians and all. I've made this planet into a paying proposition, I'll tell you, and I got where I am today through my own efforts."

"Hear, hear," said B. Barratt Osborne, into his bourbon.

"Now, you know I ain't the man to brag," Ed Crowley assured them. "But I've done something with this joint, what I mean. It's got *class*."

"Tell us about the Martians," Charlotte Stevens breathed.

"There were lots of 'em around once — ain't that right, Mr. Fitzgerald? The boys on the early ships saw 'em. But now there's just a few in the cities and on the other land grants, so far as anyone knows. I've got ten of 'em right here and that's the most

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I ever saw together at one time."

"Gosh," said Charlotte Stevens.

"Jeepers *creepers*," said B. Barratt Osborne.

"I'll tell you," the great man continued. "Them Martians of mine guide the tourists, meet the ships, put on dances, and kinda prowl around addin' color to the joint. Me, I'm a tolerant man. I treat them Martians right and I don't see where they got any cause to complain, what I mean. Them Martians, they're sorta screwy, but they're just like kids; you gotta handle them right."

"That, in essence, is quite correct," spoke up Professor La Farge. "As you perhaps know, I took a group of Martian gray rats and ran them through some rather intricate maze problems. Their psychological patterns were definitely child-like, and by use of the La Farge Equivalents Equation, I was able to apply my findings to the Martians as a whole. You are, I trust, familiar with my monograph on the subject —"

"Nuts," said B. Barratt Osborne, thus upholding his interplanetary reputation for sarcastic wit. Wilson Thorne puffed on his calabash and solemnly entered the devastating remark in a notebook.

"Well, anyhow, it's about time we got this shebang on the road," Ed Crowley said. "That Death Dance is really the cat's whiskers, what I mean. Last authentic art form of a dying race and all that gas. Now, if you'll all just leave your ten bucks in this little old box here . . ."

Everyone crowded around and deposited ten dollars in the box — except, of course, B. Barratt Osborne, who naturally was entitled to special privileges because he was such a funny fellow. John Fitzgerald noticed that Pat Somerset was busily engaged in patting his son on the head.

"My, what a fine little boy!" she cooed.

"Say thank you to the nice lady," John Fitzgerald said.

"Thank you," Bobby said dutifully.

"Two!" yelled Ed Crowley. "Hey, Two! Now where the devil *is* that damned Martian?"

The students followed the great man out into the night.

The wind had died and it was cold and still under the moons of Mars. John Fitzgerald shivered as he helped Bobby into the transport. One of the Martians took over the manual controls. His tall body was clumsy in the narrow space and his waves of snow-white hair almost touched the top of the vehicle.

"One thing about them natives," Ed Crowley said. "They learn fast."

"Cultural diffusion," offered Dr. La Farge. "It works both ways."

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Ed Crowley picked up a voice amplifier, not that he needed one.

"Now notice," he launched into his prepared commentary. "Notice the characteristic night flowers blooming in forgotten splendor under the beautiful twin moons of Mars, Phobos and Deimos. That means Fear and Panic, you know. Fear and Panic are the ancient companions of Mars, who back on Earth was thought of as the god of war. It is hard to believe, looking at this peaceful world, that it could ever have been connected with such a thing as war. We are now approaching an abandoned shrine where in bygone days . . ."

John Fitzgerald didn't listen; glib second-hand sentiment always made him uncomfortable. Personally, he wished that Crowley would shut up.

It was as bright as the western plains under a full moon on Earth. The tall grasses were a sea of silver under the stars. The air was clear and cold. Looking at it you could almost imagine that nothing had changed, that it was all the way it had been before the Earthmen came. . . .

The transport stopped. They all got out and hurried down a path through the motionless grasses. They came to a clearing where rows of stone benches gleamed whitely in the iced light of the moons.

"Here we are," Ed Crowley said. "It won't be long now."

They waited.

The stone benches were cold and lonely. The little group of visitors huddled together in the stillness. Pat Somerset fished a perfumed cigarette out of her purse and puffed on it until it lit. The grass was still, the shadows black. The darkness was alive.

Across the clearing — movement.

"Here come the funny Martians!" Bobby cried.

"Now look out," said B. Barratt Osborne.

"It's about to begin," said the professor.

The Martians came out of the shadows and the dance was on.

There wasn't any music — or was there? John Fitzgerald wasn't sure. There were no instruments that he could see, and the dancers did not appear to be singing. And yet there *was* something — a feeling, a rhythm, a silver melody that shivered up your spine.

The Martians danced, and they weren't funny any more. Their white hair stood out vividly in the moonlight, and their slender bodies moved with fluid grace. They belonged somehow — belonged there in the clearing with the grasses all around them and the purple hills silent in the distance. And the music . . .

"It's a little different each time," the professor said.

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"All we need now is Frankenstein's monster to make this party really gay," said Pat Somerset.

"Shhhh!" whispered Charlotte Stevens. "I think they're *cute*."

Wilson Thorne smoked his pipe and took frantic notes in his brown notebook.

It was a strange dance — quiet and unhurried and almost random in its movements. But there were patterns in the graceful movements of the dancers, Fitzgerald noticed. It was like a slow-motion pantomime. Half of the Martians executed apparently meaningless steps with their eyes closed. The other half circled them slowly, and then came in for the kill, over and over again.

The Death Dance.

John Fitzgerald felt a chill race through his body. The whole thing was eerie. The Martians seemed to kill with knives and hands and guns and rays. They never missed. The Martians had no guns, no rays, he told himself. The dance went on, neither rising nor falling in intensity. There was no emotional build-up, no climax. It just went on.

"They are a dying race," the professor said.

"I think they're crazy," said Pat Somerset, pulling her fur coat closer around her satin dress.

"They're so *quaint*," said Charlotte Stevens.

As suddenly as it had begun, the dance was over. The Martians faded back into the shadows and the feeling of music was gone. The clearing was empty.

"So that's what we came all the way from Marsopolis to see," Pat Somerset said. "Give me the floor show at the Crystal Room any day."

"That's enough, Miss Somerset," the professor said. "I must say that I'm disappointed in you — *most* disappointed."

Pat Somerset smiled coolly at him. She got back into the transport and the others followed her. A Martian was already at the controls.

"I've been working on the functional aspects of the Death Dance," Professor La Farge announced as they hummed through the night back to the Ranch House. "My anthropologist friends tell me that such ceremonial dances always have some function in a total culture, whether or not the participants are aware of it. This was true of the old Indian dances back on Earth. You have perhaps seen some of the pictures that were taken of the dances as recently as 1980? Not the real thing, of course, since their culture was hardly their own anymore and they were just going on with a tradition that had outlived its usefulness. But you get the idea. Those ceremonials were used to integrate the society, to train the children, to dramatize their

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religions, to enforce authority — all sorts of things. But there was always a *true* function, as opposed to what went on out in the open. This Death Dance presents an interesting-problem; it may take me some weeks to work it out fully. My theory is that it represents the resignation of the Martians to their fate. They are dying out, you see, and . . ."

"Knock it off," hissed B. Barratt Osborne. "Spies are everywhere!"

The students giggled and Wilson Thorne made another entry in his notebook.

"Daddy," Bobby whispered, "I want to go home."

John Fitzgerald looked at his son. Funny — he'd had the same idea himself, an inexplicable urge to leave, to get off the planet. Mars was so different from the world that he had known — and yet he had helped to make it this way. And these people . . .

"Okay, Bobby," he said quietly. "It hasn't turned out for you the way I had hoped it would, and I'm sorry. We'll take a copter to Marsopolis in the morning, and tomorrow night we'll be on the ship for Earth! How'll that be?"

"Swell," Bobby said happily.

They went on through the clean, cold air and the Martian grasses were coated with silver in the moonlight.

The next night all the lights in the Ranch House were on, blazing their glare into the darkness. A north wind whined across the fields and lost itself in the rock canyons of the mountains. One of the two small moons was just rising over the horizon, and the stars were bright and cold.

Ed Crowley, Professor La Farge and B. Barratt Osborne were playing hit the bottle in front of a roaring fire in the massive fireplace of the great living room. The fire threw out flickering shadows that cavorted playfully among the redwood cross beams on the ceiling.

"One!" shouted Ed Crowley.

No answer.

"*One!*"

Silence.

"Where the devil are those Martians?" he inquired of no one in particular. "Haven't seen one of 'em in hours. Never around when you need them, what I mean."

"Like children," Professor La Farge mumbled. "Jes' like children, jes' like li'l kids."

"Ah, yes," said B. Barratt Osborne, fixing himself another drink. "Speaking of children, where *are* the junior geniuses?"

"They're throwing a shindig down at the river," Ed Crowley informed him. "Might kinda wander down that way myself a little later. That Pat Somerset is some dish, what I mean."

"If you like dishes," the great

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writer said very casually.

"Now wait a minute," the professor objected. "Now jes' you wait a li'l ol' *minute*. I'm resporse — responsh —"

"Responsible," supplied B. Barratt Osborne.

"Yes. Responsible. I tell you, I'm responsible for — for — what was I saying?"

"Forget it," suggested B. Barratt Osborne.

Ed Crowley sank into an armchair. "What I want to know is where are those Martians?" he complained. "The old dump feels . . . *different*."

The wind blew cold in the night.

"You need a drink," said B. Barratt Osborne.

It was chilly, somehow, in the room. The fire blazed away and the bourbon did its best, but there was a persistent coldness in the air. Loud in the silence, a shutter banged monotonously against the wall.

The adjusted Terra Clock struck eleven.

"I'd just like to know where those damned Martians went to," Ed Crowley said nervously.

The shadows played on the walls. And something *moved* in the dark corner.

"What was that?" B. Barratt Osborne asked sharply.

"I didn't —"

"*There* — there in the corner. Something's there."

The great fire crackled in the fireplace.

"One!" Ed Crowley said loudly. "One, is that you?"

No answer.

"One! If that's you I'll skin you alive!"

Shadows. Ed Crowley hefted a bottle angrily and got to his feet.

"For the last time," he threatened in a high, thin voice. "Come out of there!"

The thing came out. It *was* One, right enough — but he wasn't alone. There were others with him. Martians. Quite suddenly, the room was full of Martians. They walked in through the doors and crawled through the windows. They came down the stairs. There were hundreds of them — tall and thin and awkward-looking. Their snow-white hair was vivid under the lights, their cold green eyes steady and unblinking. They were armed. Armed with guns and rays and tubes and various metallic things which no man had ever seen before.

Ed Crowley dropped his bottle.

"Here come the funny Martians!" said One.

"Now look out," said Two.

"It's about to begin," said Three.

The night pressed in against the house.

"You *talk*," whispered Ed Crowley.

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"We talk," agreed One. He kept coming.

The three men crouched against the wall by the fireplace, their faces white and wet with sweat.

"The guns, the rays! So many of you. Where —"

"There are millions of us," One said coldly.

"*Millions?* All dead, dying —"

"We have lived in the caves under the mountains for fifty years," Two said steadily. His green eyes were like ice. "They were quite elaborate caves, and we went there when it became evident that we could not otherwise hold out against the madmen from Earth. We fixed it so that we could not be found, and we went to work. We have powers, you know. We can read minds, and we heard every word that you ever spoke. We sent spies out to learn about your ships and guns — and we made a few improvements of our own. We sent out spies — and you took them in as tourist attractions."

The Martians laughed. Soundlessly.

"One thing about them natives," Three said. "They learn fast."

"They are like children," One said.

The Martians came closer. They reached out their thin hands and touched the terrified men. They took them out into the cold night and put them in the transport.

"Are — are you going to kill us all?" asked Professor La Farge shakily.

"Not all," said One cheerfully. "Most. A few, like the learned children on the river, we will keep. For tourist attractions, you know."

Professor La Farge began to sob brokenly.

"Notice the characteristic night flowers," Two said ironically as the transport hummed through the stillness. His voice was edged with hate. "Notice them blooming in forgotten splendor under the beautiful twin moons of Mars. We are now approaching an abandoned shrine, where in bygone days . . ."

The transport stopped.

"No," whispered B. Barratt Osborne.

The Martians took them into the shrine where it was cold and still. They had waited a long time.

"Don't do it, don't do it," cried Ed Crowley, falling to his knees. "We've learned our lesson . . . learned our lesson. We'll go away — never bother you again, never. It's your planet, just like always. You can have it back again."

"I'm afraid that won't do," Three said tonelessly. "Unhappily for you, we have learned *our* lesson too. Mars is old, exhausted. We don't want our planet back."

(*Continued on page 161*)

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CANDLESTICKS

BY DEAN EVANS

You hear a lot of talk about second sight: the ability to see into the future. With a faculty like that you could become a newspaper columnist, handicap the horses, check up on your wife, or even get a seat on the subway.

Take Ray Siebert, for instance. True, he didn't have the gift himself, but he knew a man who did. With Old Webb's aid he won a lot of money on a golf game, but that wasn't enough. He had to stretch his luck in a game of life and death — only to learn that second sight, like a sword, can cut two ways!

You'll get more stories by Dean Evans, if we can manage it!

IT would be difficult to put your finger on Old Webb's nationality for he was, after all, just a small old man — with dry cracked leather for skin, and two small slits where nothing ever showed but wind-whipped tears for eyes, and a sprinkling of very fine gray silken threads where most people wear their hair. If anybody had ever been interested enough to speak with Old Webb, with the idea of listening to the sound of his voice for a clue, it would have availed nothing: Old Webb's diction might have come from any English-speaking country in the whole world except England itself — which was rather a pity in a way, and perhaps one of the things

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wrong with England. However, nobody ever was sufficiently interested to bother. Not at first, that is.

Old Webb.

Old Webb pottered about at the Victoria Club. He smoothed up sandtraps. He replaced an occasional divot here or there. Now and again he picked up an empty beer can on the fairways where no empty beer can has a right to be. People like Old Webb do things like that for a living. Other people never bother with those like Old Webb, except if they happen to find out that such people sometimes have a rare gift which is lacking in most of us.

Eventually, they found out about Old Webb's gift, of course. It was on one of those lousy days when the sweat rolling under your armpits is all acid and it itches so you dig with your fingernails and then it begins to burn sharp and hot. There was a stalled foursome on the tee-off to the thirteenth hole. Four men. Three of them were on the bench, their bags scattered around, their eyes red-rimmed and looking tired. The fourth, a large and fat man who walked as though the spikes on his shoes were staking out new claims, was bent down and jabbing a wooden tee into the ground. What was holding up the foursome was a slat-thin woman with a white hat no smaller than an aspirin tablet and a bagcart no larger than a boat trailer. The slat-thin woman was down on the fairway dribbling her ball toward a flag that waved teasingly in the distance.

As for Old Webb, he happened to be at the ball-scrubber nearby, pouring water into it from a rusty watering can. His fingers around the metal handle of the can were very gnarled, very curled, very ancient. Finishing with that, he walked slowly over to the drinking fountain. He laid his watering can on the ground and from one of his pockets took a rag that used to be white, and with it cleaned the little porcelain sink of the fountain and then pushed the fountain's button to flush the lint away. That made a bee come up from somewhere below and begin buzzing angrily.

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Old Webb didn't budge. Old Webb stared quietly at the bee. The bee went away.

"Hell with that skinny dame out there!" suddenly growled the large man with the spike shoes. "We can't wait all day, dammit." So saying, he rolled up the cuffs of his pants and exposed green socks that seemed to be quite mysteriously bright and luminous. Straightening again, he hauled a crumpled score card from his pants pocket and frowned at it.

"Hey, Siebert!" he barked. "You had a four on that last hole. Get up here."

One of the men on the bench said, "Right, Chief," and took a club from one of the bags. He tee'd a ball, got himself set, waggled his club on loose wrists, and swung. "One gets ten you slice it!" boomed the large man with the spikes and green socks.

The ball sliced off and went into the trees some seventy-five or eighty yards away.

"Haw, haw, haw!" chortled the large man.

Siebert bit his lip. Neither of the two on the bench said anything. But Siebert's face was a dull, very unhealthy red as he retrieved his tee.

Grinning broadly, the large man patted himself on the tummy. He hitched up his pants. "Me next," he said. Then he shaded his eyes with his hands and judged the fairway up to the thirteenth hole. He turned to his bag and chose a number three iron.

"A dinky short hole like this," he said sneeringly. "A guy could wish it in."

Siebert put his club in his bag and then rubbed his right leg very slowly. He didn't say anything. He walked over to the drinking fountain where Old Webb was just putting his rag away and reaching down for his watering can. Old Webb was looking at nobody — but Old Webb was talking out of lips that moved slowly over the words.

"Socks," Old Webb was muttering softly. "Green socks and a number three iron. A dinky short hole, he says. Dinky, huh? Short,

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huh? I give it thirty yards straight into the rough."

Siebert, just leaning over the fountain, cocked a surprised eye at Old Webb and smiled faintly. He punched the button on the fountain and sipped the tepid water. He gargled it around in his mouth and then looked over at the large man with the spike shoes and the bright green socks. The large man was winding up and swinging.

The ball made a startled leap as though somebody had tried to hit it. It went to the left in a high arc. It landed in some rocks and dead bushes and deader sand. It didn't bounce, not even once.

Siebert grinned and swiveled his head toward Old Webb. But Old Webb was now ten feet away, bent down, not watching, picking up a candy wrapper and an empty cigarette package and stuffing them into a burlap bag slung at his hip.

The large man cursed loudly. He glared around to see who was laughing. Nobody was. He spat viciously. "Lousy goddam wind," he said out of curled lips.

Somebody snickered softly at that.

A little time went tip-toeing very carefully by. At last one of the two men on the bench got up, got his bag, got out a club and tee'd his ball. He said to the large man: "The way it goes sometimes, Art. Too bad. Wish me luck on mine."

"Oh hell, yes," growled the large man.

Siebert, at the fountain, leaned down to punch the button once more. Then he stopped, and a thoughtful look crossed his face as he heard Old Webb's hoarse voice some ten feet or so away.

"Straight like arrows," Old Webb was whispering. "Right up on the green."

Siebert stiffened. He didn't take another drink after all. He stared at Old Webb's turned back for a long moment. Then he looked over at the man addressing the tee'd ball.

He saw the swing; he heard the clean clicking smack as the ball left the tee. He raised his eyes and followed its course. The ball wasn't high, perhaps eight feet off the ground. It flew directly down the center of the fairway in a flat trajectory that appeared to be most astronomically precise. Somewhere on its way it hissed over the head of a startled woman in a tiny white hat, and it had a good two feet of clearance as it did.

Nobody said a word. Nobody breathed. Nobody lived except to watch that ball in flight. They watched it finally come to earth; watched it hit, bounce twice and then roll easily over the lip of the green and come to a gentle stop. Only then did anybody come to life.

"Well, I'm damned for sure,"

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gawked the man who had made the drive.

Over at the fountain, Siebert took a long breath. He shot Old Webb a hard glance and then left the fountain, went to the tee-off, then walked carefully and with measured steps away from that point and slightly to the left.

"Hey!" yelled the large man sourly. "Where the hell you going?"

But Siebert didn't stop. He went directly to where the large man's ball lay in the rocks and bushes and sand. Then he turned, came back — this time fast — and looked around for Old Webb. But Old Webb wasn't there any more. Old Webb had disappeared, probably over the slow rise of ground that led back to the green of the twelfth hole.

"Thirty yards, he said," Siebert whispered very softly to himself. "And it was, to the foot. And in the rough — believe me, you never saw it so rough."

The large man's face wasn't very pretty to look at. "All right, by God!" he yelled belligerently. "All right, I ain't blind. *So what?*"

That made Siebert blink and shake his head and work up a quick, placating smile. "Huh? Why, nothing, Chief," he said quickly. "Nothing at all."

Ray Siebert pulled his tan convertible into the Victoria parking lot. He yanked up on the parking brake, turned the key in the ignition, pocketed the key, then got out and headed for the small green outline of the pro shop in the half-distance over near the first tee. Before he had gone more than a quarter of the way, he could feel the sweat beads rise on the back of his neck and at the roots of the hair on his head. Today was going to be another hot one. Like yesterday.

He went through the swinging glass doors, felt the welcome coolness of the pro shop as he walked over to the glass showcase displaying a few dozen balls and a club or two and one leather bag looking as though it would go fifty solid pounds stripped down.

There wasn't anybody around, not even Angie the assistant. He frowned thoughtfully, turned around and leaned his back against the counter and stared at more equipment posing on little dais-like things here and there on the waxed floor.

Somebody said: "Hi, Mr. Siebert. Saw you coming from the parking lot but I was busy in the back room. What can I do for you?"

Siebert turned around and faced the man now behind the counter. "You've got cat's feet, Angie," he said. "I never heard you. Where's the Pro?"

The man behind the counter grinned. Then said: "Dave's out of town. Didn't have anything

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lined up here this week so he done took off."

Siebert nodded. "Just wondering. Look, how about a couple beers? We could take them outside to a table in the shade. There was something I wanted to tell you." He dropped a dollar bill on the counter.

Angie smiled, turned, went in the back room. The dull thud of a refrigerator door sounded back there, and when he reappeared he was carrying two uncapped brown bottles. He laid them on the counter. He stuck the dollar bill in a cigar box on a little shelf and then went around the end of the counter and joined Siebert on the other side. The two walked to some lawn chairs that were under a spreading magnolia out near the putting practice square.

"Your party, Mr. Siebert," said Angie, dropping into one of the chairs.

Siebert sat down, took a long pull from his bottle. He said nothing for a moment, just holding the bottle out and staring reflectively at it. Then he laid it carefully at his feet and twisted around in his chair until he was able to dig his wallet from his hip pocket. From the wallet he extracted a bill that looked like a fifty. This he folded twice and stretched his hand toward Angie.

"Shake, friend."

Angie's eyes widened — but he took the proffered hand. When Siebert's hand reached down once more for his bottle, it didn't have the fifty in it any more.

"That's a neat trick, Mr. Siebert," said Angie softly. "It could scare me, it's so neat."

Siebert smiled around the corners of his mouth. He raised his bottle; got the neck between his teeth and didn't let go until it bled to death. Then he negligently dropped it over the side of his chair.

He said, "You scare too easy. All I had on my mind was an old codger here who mopes around the course watering daisies and such."

"Huh?" said Angie. And then, catching up, he added: "Oh, yeah. Old Webb, you mean."

"Old Webb." Siebert pronounced it as though it had a distinct taste, a flavor. "I see. I'd like to speak with this Old Webb."

Angie's eyes got a little puzzled-looking. "Huh?" he said.

"Smooth it down," said Siebert with a short laugh. "The old boy isn't in a jam. Nothing like that. I just wanted to talk to him . . . in private."

There was a little period of silence while Angie thought about it. His bottle remained untouched in his hand and grew warm and flat and bitter.

"Nice day," said Siebert to nobody. "If you like it hot."

"Mr. Siebert," said Angie, "fifty bucks is a pretty big gun just to

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talk to Old Webb, ain't it?"

Siebert smiled faintly. "I thought perhaps you might have rules about bothering the employees. I don't mind buying my way — if I have to."

There was a little more silence. Tailings of a hot wind, tumbling down from the brown hills to the north, gently stirred wax leaves on the magnolia, making them glint dully. Siebert wiped at his forehead, added: "There's a buck or two in it for the old man. He could probably use it."

Angie sighed. "He probably could, Mr. Siebert. He doesn't make much around here. Mind you, I know this ain't none of my business — it's just that I wouldn't want troubles. A guy's gotta eat, and he can't eat when he's fired unless he's got something else lined up and I ain't and so you see what I mean."

Siebert shrugged. "If I worried like you do I'd have circles under my eyes."

Angie sighed. He put his bottle down, got out of his chair. "I sent him out on the fifteenth this morning. We're having a little gopher trouble out on the fifteenth, Mr. Siebert."

"I could watch the pro shop while you're gone," said Siebert smoothly.

Angie nodded. He cleared his throat and spit white dry cotton on the grass at his feet. Then he carefully put the fifty in his wallet. "Still your party, I guess, Mr. Siebert," he said. He moved away in the general direction of the fifteenth hole.

Siebert arose, collected the beer bottles and walked over to the pro shop. He went to the back room, clattered the bottles into a case of empties. He went to the glass doors and looked out at the little square of living green velvet where you do practice putts. There was nobody around; it was Monday morning and it was too early.

"Small prognostications of a greens keeper," he said to himself. And then, as though sensing a certain vague rhythm in that thought: "The Smalls of Old Man Webb."

He went through the doors, walked slowly over to the practice green where little iron flags stuck up out of the cups like so many candles on a cake.

"Our large fat Romeo isn't going to like this," he whispered. "Even five years from now he isn't going to like it. All of which is a very great pity, I'm sure."

There wasn't a sound, the wind off the hills had gone away. Overhead, now and then a leaf fluttered down — but carefully, silently, like tip-toeing out of a sickroom where shades are drawn and where noise is a dangerous thing. There was something in Siebert's eyes; and his lips were lifted slightly away from his teeth like

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a dog getting set to fang down through the breast bones of a paralyzed chicken.

The large man belched and then pushed himself away from the clubhouse bar. He stared around frowning.

"Where in hell's that great golf expert?" he wanted to know.

One of the two men beside him smiled and didn't answer. The other — a small man with gray-looking eyes and a wispy mustache that would some day match very nicely — gulped down the last of his beer, got out his handkerchief and dabbed at his lips.

"Oh, say, I forgot," he said hastily. "Siebert said he'd meet us at the tee-off. Said he forgot his shoes or something and had to go back to the car for them."

The large man sneered. "That sounds just about right for him. Why in hell didn't he just wear 'em like I did?"

The large man belched again and muttered, "Goddam beer's too cold" very loudly so nobody missed hearing it, including the barman. He curled thick lips at his beer glass and swung away from the bar on spiked shoes. He went out the side door. The others went with him. None of them noticed the amused glances of a few couples who sat in the booths against the far wall; nor, of course, the barman slapping his bar rag down hard and making faces at himself in the shining mahogany.

The large fat man dumped his bag to the ground. He put one big shoe-filled foot up in a lawn chair and started to roll up his pantleg. His socks were a brilliant orange.

"Say, I believe this is Siebert now," said the man with the mustache.

The large man swiveled his head. Siebert was just coming up from the general direction of the pro shop. He seemed a little out of breath.

"You missed something," growled the large man. "A drink — free."

Siebert smiled around. "Hi, Mawson. Hi, Labby, how's the mustache coming?" And to the large man: "Sorry, Chief. Left my shoes in the car. Went back after them."

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"Got 'em now, though?" The large man winked heavily at the man with the mustache. "Got both feet to fit 'em? Got your legs? Got your arms? Got your — oh no, I keep forgetting. You get along fine without that."

The man with the mustache tittered.

Siebert shrugged, worked up a little smile. It wasn't a very successful smile.

The fat man dropped his right foot to the ground and hefted his left up in the chair. He rolled that pantleg up too. "Now, there's socks," he said admiringly.

"They're really darbs, Art," said the man with the mustache.

"Secret weapon," chuckled the large fat man. "Dames see 'em, it hypnotizes 'em."

For an instant Siebert's jawline showed under the flesh. He didn't say anything. He didn't move, he didn't look at anybody. None of the others said anything either; you don't talk and think hard at the same time.

"Well, what's all the deadpans for?" growled the large man. "We gonna play this game, or just dream it away standin' here?"

Mawson moved forward. "You could drive off first if you'd like," he suggested quietly. "I'll get a card ready for Labby and me."

The large man nodded. He yanked down on his cap and went over and jammed a tee into the ground. "Somebody care for a little extra on the first hole?" he asked slyly. "Besides the usual buck?"

Siebert was just swinging his

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head back as though he had been looking for something. "Not me on this hole, Chief," he said. "Superstitious."

The large man sneered. He rubbed fat palms together. He picked up his club and curled fat stubby fingers around it. He jerked it back and forth. His thick lips went into an involuntary "oh" as he swung.

The ball went straight, low, nice.

"A dandy, Art," said the man with the mustache.

The large man smiled broadly. He patted his tummy. He hitched up his pants. Then he gloved his club and slung his bag over his shoulder. That made him belch again. "Goddam beer," he grunted sourly.

They played the hole. Mawson and Labby did it in a respectable five. The large man got a birdie. Siebert took six.

They played the second and third. And the fourth. There were very few people on the course, they had it almost to themselves. On the fifth, Siebert dropped one into the cup from twelve feet. It was his first good shot.

They were just dropping their bags at the tee for the sixth when Old Webb showed up.

Old Webb was very inconspicuous. If you didn't look for him you didn't see him. Like that. He shuffled slowly, quietly. He picked up bits of papers here and there, stuffed them into the bag at his side. He didn't say anything. Only once did he raise his eyes — to Siebert. Then he disappeared again as quietly as he had come.

"I believe you had a four on the last, Art," said the man with the mustache.

"Yeah," said the large man. "Pebble or somethin' on the green back there or I woulda had a three." He waggled his club like a buggy whip, hunched up his fat shoulders. Then, as if in an afterthought, he looked back at Siebert.

"Superstition gone away now, little man?"

Siebert smiled. "Whatever you say, Chief. Name it."

"Ten simoleons?" said the large man, grinning.

Siebert started to say "Oke, Chief —" and then stopped, made a little face. "Shucks, Chief, don't pity me. Make it fifty if you want."

"Huh?" The large man's eyes blinked, then closed down narrowly, and a malicious grin sneaked out at one corner of his mouth. "Yeah?" he said slowly. "Fifty, huh? Fine." He turned back and addressed his ball. "This'll be pure homicide," he chuckled. He wound up. His mouth went into an "oh". He swung.

"Hundred and fifty yards if it's an inch," he said loudly.

Siebert smiled. He walked past the fat man and tee'd his ball. He

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swung quickly, easily. His drive was good, the ball was still in the air when it went past the lie of the fat man's.

"Watch me sink it with an eight iron!" said the large man.

But he was wrong. Siebert took the hole.

"Goddam heat," said the fat man bitterly.

They played a few more holes. The large fat man was strangely quiet. Mawson did fairly well fairly steadily. The man with the mustache didn't do anything. Nobody expected him to do anything. Nobody cared.

On the tenth, the large man's teeth came together as he straddled the ball. "To some guys, fifty bucks is a large bank full of dough," he growled down in his throat.

Siebert was watching the hunched-over form of Old Webb feeding a clean towel into the ball-scrubber. He caught Old Webb's eyes and then said quickly: "Oke, Chief. Whatever you say. Fifty again?"

The large man kept his eyes blank. "I figgered maybe a couple hundred," he suggested softly, innocently.

"A couple hund . . . ?" Siebert let his mouth drop. He held it like that, let the large man see it. He said then, "Well, if you say so. . . ."

The large man grinned big. He rubbed fat palms together. He looked around at the man with the mustache, and drew his eyelid down in a broad wink.

On the right side of the fairway were trees — old trees, some of them quite dead. Left there, as though scattered naturally, were dead branches on the ground. There were a lot of old dead leaves. A few rocks hidden beneath the leaves. On the left of the fairway was a stone wall and high, braced screening that marked the bounds of the club's property. Between these two hazards and directly ahead like a smooth green road, pointing straight to home and fireside, was the flag of the sixth hole.

Still grinning, the big man knuckled his number one wood. He wound up. His mouth went into an "oh". He swung. His ball hooked wildly over to the left, smacked against a screen brace and then caromed high in the air and went across the fairway and landed finally in the trees, where it disappeared.

"Oh, say, that's a shame, Art!" cried the man with the mustache.

There was an instant of horrible silence after that. Siebert smiled faintly. He went around the glowering big man. He tee'd his ball. He looked relaxed, confident. He swung quickly, easily.

The ball went straight down the alley between the hazards as though there were tenpins at the end of it that were due to get

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knocked flat. Siebert watched it, smiling, and then bent down, retrieved his tee and said softly:

"That's nice shooting, isn't it, Chief?"

"Lucky —" cursed the fat man.

"Could be, Chief," said Siebert quite reasonably. "But that's the way the world goes, isn't it?" He turned, winked at the man with the mustache. He made it a big, deliberate wink. The man with the mustache started to smile and then hastily wiped it off his face and coughed down at his shoetops.

Siebert took the hole without trying. Old Webb had gone away somewhere else.

The fat man was perspiring and looking puzzled and a little mad. There were red spots high up on his face as he drove on the seventeenth. He glared out at the fairway. He sneered at it. He wound up, his mouth working again. He drove off viciously.

The ball went toward the green as though somebody were carrying it there in a hip pocket.

"Well, say, that's dandy, Art!" exclaimed the man with the mustache, and clapped his hands. "Wasn't that just dandy!"

The large man let out a breath of air and grinned happily. He looked around, collected up Labby's admiring smile. He patted his tummy and pulled up his pants. And then, suddenly, the happy look went out of his eyes.

"I shoulda had a bet on that one," he mumbled sourly.

"Eighteenth coming right up, Chief," said Siebert easily, smiling.

The bent-over form of Old Webb crossing the fairway in the distance looked a tiny thing, a pigmied thing of uncertain reality. He went toward the eighteenth hole slowly. He didn't kick up a fuss or dust or anything as he went. He didn't even disturb the birds. Nobody noticed him, nobody was supposed to notice him.

Except Siebert.

"Tell you what, Chief," said Siebert pleasantly. "This has been a hard day on you, hasn't it? What have you lost so far — two-fifty? Well, tell you what: give you a sporting chance on the last hole. How about doubling? Five hundred or nothing?" His words were loud. They carried to Mawson and Labby.

The large fat man's eyes went stretched and his teeth came together. He didn't answer. He stared straight ahead, walking grimly toward the tee-off.

"Been a grand day, hasn't it, Labby?" Siebert said to the small man with the mustache. "Did you ever see such a sky — all blue?"

"Yes it has," said the man with the mustache. "Maybe a little bit warm but —"

"I like it warm," said Siebert decisively.

"Oh, I do, too!" said the small

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man with the mustache.

The four men dropped their bags. The large fat man put his hands on his hips and stared hard at Siebert. For a long moment he said nothing.

Then: "All right, Mr. Wise Guy. Five hundred you want, is it? Now I'll tell you something. *I* want a thousand even." There was something deep down — hard — in his words. Something that carried a warning.

"Thousand?" Siebert smiled calmly. "Fine, Chief. Anything you say."

The large man stared a moment longer. He said nothing else. Finally he jerked down a short nod. His lips were tight together. He got his club from his bag. He set up his ball. He got set. He took a very long, careful time getting set. At last he swung, his mouth dropping open in an oval.

It was a good drive, not quite far enough perhaps, but good. He stood there watching it, watched it come to a stop.

Mawson cleared his throat, said suddenly: "Look, fellows, since this seems to be a contest of some sort between Art and Siebert, I think I'll just drop out, if it's okay with everybody. I'll pay the forfeit, of course."

"Well, say, you know I believe I shall too," said the man with the mustache. And then he giggled a little. "I'd much rather just tag along and watch anyhow."

The large man stared. His lips went together a trifle tighter. He moved his big head and looked at Siebert.

Siebert — smiling still — said mildly: "Quite all right with me. Come along, by all means."

He moved to the tee-off, leaned down with his ball. He straightened. Smiling around with a quick turn of his head, he addressed the ball. He drew his club up and swung. Fast.

The ball went almost identical with the large man's. Even at that distance, they could see the two lies were less than ten feet from one another.

"And now the approach," Siebert said pleasantly.

They walked slowly. No one said anything except once when Siebert mentioned casually: "You boys coming back to the clubhouse for a shower soon as this is over?"

"Like to," said Mawson. "'Fraid I haven't the time, though. Have to be trotting on home. I'll drop by and have a quick beer, though, before I go."

"Me too," said the man with the small mustache. "I mean, have to run along too."

"Oh, stop for a beer anyway," urged Siebert.

Upon coming close it was seen that the large man's ball was nearer to the green. He waited while Siebert selected a club, took

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careful eye measure, and swung.

The ball lofted neatly. For an instant it hung apparently motionless in the air before it began its downward swoop toward the green. When it landed it stopped without rolling. It was three feet inside the lip of the green.

The big man's mouth went tight. He took a number five. He didn't say a word; didn't waste an unnecessary moment beyond a long glare straight before him. He swung.

It was very efficiently done. It went high, arced, came down rolling. Parallel to the cup — but six inches to the right — it rolled on by and slowly came to a stop about three feet the other side.

"Oh, my heavens!" ejaculated the small man with the mustache. He sounded like he'd just lost his pants in a high wind.

The large man didn't relax. He didn't say a word. He nodded in approval, dropped his club in his bag, and started walking.

"Nice, Chief," Siebert said. "Now *that* one was a nice shot."

They went up on the green. Siebert's was away, so of course he shot first. He was a good fifteen feet from the cup and slightly downhill. He studied the lie carefully for a moment, then looked up. Directly below, raking sand in the trap, was the form of Old Webb. The way he was slowly pulling on the rake made it seem as though he had always been in that identical spot and, moreover, would remain there without change for the rest of his days.

Siebert smiled faintly. "Wish me luck, won't you, Chief?" he murmured. He stroked gently, gently, as though there were some tenuous thread between club and ball that dared not be broken. The ball went slowly. It took on a slight curve away from the cup, rather much like light rays bending around the universe. At the last possible moment it dropped down on the tail end of the curve. There was but one inevitable ending: it rolled solidly into the cup.

"*Beautiful!*" Mawson whispered.

"Oh, say, I've never seen such a shot!" exclaimed the man with the mustache.

Siebert grinned. "Well, Chief?"

You couldn't miss a thing like that. Not at three feet, you couldn't. Not when the man before you has just dropped clean from fifteen feet or more. Not *that* man.

The large man stood motionless over his ball. He took the putter in his big hands. His large feet went apart, stayed that way. He bent over. He drew back his club. His mouth went into an "oh" and trembled there. Trembled there badly. He swung. The ball went about nine inches and stopped dead.

Siebert grinned pityingly. "Go ahead and take it over, Chief. It's perfectly all right with me."

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It isn't nice to see horrible things happening in a fat man's eyes. It isn't nice to be there and have to watch it. The large man didn't say a word. He picked up his bag and moved stiffly, woodenly, away.

The three waited until the large man's figure was several yards away and then began to follow him in the direction of the clubhouse.

The three of them had a beer in the barroom. There was a flush in Siebert's cheeks that wasn't entirely sunburn.

"If ever anybody had the luck of the devil it was you, lad," said Mawson quietly.

Siebert winked. He winked and smiled. Then he turned from the bar and went down the short hall that led to the locker room. He crossed the locker room, went to the door of the shower. He opened the door, peered in. The fat man was in there alone. Showering.

He let the door close softly. He went to his locker, leisurely began to take off his clothes. Naked, he stretched, luxuriously. He grinned. He reached in his locker for his towel and zipper bag that contained soap and scrub brush. Then he clogged over to the shower door and swung it wide and went in.

He looked over at the fat man. The fat man was a misty and very large bulk behind steam and hot water spray of the shower in the corner. The fat man didn't seem like the fat man at all, somehow. He seemed only a big blob of something white and soft like risen bread dough that hasn't been punched down yet.

Siebert tossed his towel at a wall hook. Then he unzipped his bag, got out his brush and threw that on the wet tile floor. He got out his soap, let that drop, too. The last thing he took from the bag was a gun. He hung the bag on another hook. He took the gun with him over to the center of the floor. He faced the bulk of the large man. He put the gun up to his own left shoulder, adjusted it so the slug would go through flesh and muscle — nothing else. Still grinning, he pulled the trigger.

"HEY!" the large fat man almost screamed it. He pawed for the faucets in the wall. Not finding them, he backed out of the spray and turned around and faced Siebert's grinning eyes.

"Wha —?" he gulped stupidly.

"Yeah, Chief," murmured Siebert. "When you get to hell, just think all the dames you can show your socks to down there. You'll love that."

He aimed with the gun. His finger curled once more on the trigger. The gun roared out and a small, black — and very ugly — mark came instantly between the large man's eyes. He went down slowly, ponderously, as befits a large fat man.

Siebert's teeth bared. He dove

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down, flinched from the pain in his left shoulder. He opened the fat man's right hand, put the gun in it, then curled the fingers around it and pressed tight.

You'd never have known the fat man was dead. With his head face down on the wet and very soapy tile floor he looked like he might be deliberately down there, blowing bubbles.

"Good-bye, Chief," Siebert muttered.

The shower room door burst open. The barman's eyes were the first to take it in. He gawked down at the fat man. Then he gawked at Siebert swaying in the middle of the room, his right hand clutching his left arm just below a wound in the shoulder. He gawked at the look of intense agony in Siebert's eyes.

Mawson saw it next. His eyes went wide in shock. After him came Labby, the small man with the mustache, and after that several others from the bar.

But it was Labby who spoke first, excitedly: "Good Lord, Siebert seems to be bleeding!"

Angie shook his head as if apologizing. He looked at the wizened form of Old Webb by his side. Then he took his eyes away and looked over the desk at the patient and tired eyes of Lieutenant James Foster.

"I know it sounds screwy, Officer," Angie said in a funny voice. "I wouldn't have bothered you with it except that Old Webb here insisted that I bring him down and tell you all about it. You see what I mean?"

Lieutenant Foster nodded. "Sure," he said. "I can see your point. I can see what Mr. Webb has been thinking. And in a way, he's right; this man Siebert had what you might say was a perfect motive. Being a salesman for Arthur Jarrigan — the dead man — and being on the road a good deal of the time, and the dead man playing around with Siebert's wife like they say he was doing . . ." He shrugged, nodded. ". . . It would make any man see red."

"That's exactly what I mean," said Angie.

"Except that isn't the way it happened," Lieutenant Foster went on. "The evidence shows it was all the other way around. The dead man must have taken a big burn at getting beat in the game that day. Siebert probably rubbed it in quite unnecessarily. Humiliated him. So, when he got to the locker room, and there was his gun in his locker — and yes it was his gun, not Siebert's — he probably just couldn't help himself. He waited inside the shower room. When Siebert came in he let him have one and it caught Siebert in the shoulder. Siebert rushed Jarrigan. In the scuffle the dead man got the second bullet through the forehead."

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Angie sighed. "All right, Officer. I ain't saying that ain't what happened. Only, you see, Old Webb here says it was the other way around. You see, Old Webb is sort of a mind reader or something. I know it sounds screwy, but it's a fact. He's got a sixth sense or something."

Angie turned on Old Webb. "Prove it to him, now, dammit," he said. "You dragged me down here, now prove it to him."

Old Webb stared up, squinting, into Lieutenant Foster's eyes. He had funny eyes, Lieutenant Foster suddenly noticed. Old Webb grinned, showing a ragged line of teeth that were tinted a delicate shade of greenish brown from age and tobacco chewing. Funny teeth, Lieutenant Foster thought. Funny color. Come to think of it, that was just about the color of the patina he was trying to get on his wife's old brass candlesticks by dipping them in urine each night.

"Candlesticks," Old Webb croaked hoarsely.

Lieutenant Foster jumped.

"You see?" said Angie. "Now, you see what I mean. And that's just the point. Siebert found out about Old Webb, see? He paid me fifty bucks to get to talk to Old Webb privately. Then he paid *him* one hundred to tip him off each time the big guy — Jarrigan — was going to bobble a shot on the course that day, see? And Siebert was betting with Jarrigan. He won twelve hundred fifty smackers."

Lieutenant Foster took a deep breath. "Siebert told us about that bet, of course. He even told the amount. But that more or less further proves what we have thought all along: that Jarrigan was incensed at his loss. He lost his head completely. It was only a stroke of luck that Siebert wasn't killed instead of him."

Angie sighed, nodded. "Okay, Officer. Tell you the truth, maybe I think you're right anyhow. I only come down here because Old Webb insisted on it."

"Appreciate your trying to help," said Lieutenant Foster. "We always appreciate it, don't think we don't."

"Okay." Angie started for the door, turned, dragged Old Webb along with him. Then he stopped once more, and said as if he'd just remembered: "Oh, one more thing before we go. Old Webb here says to tell you when Siebert is up and around again he's got it in his mind to figure out a scheme to knock off his wife, too. I just thought I'd tell you that so you could sort of watch out for it."

"Thanks," said Lieutenant Foster. He watched the two leave. When the door closed he began to smile. And then, suddenly, the smile turned to a frown and he stared down at his fingernails, thinking.

"Candlesticks," he muttered softly to himself.

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Illustrator: B. Frankenberg

THE MOON OF Montezuma

BY CORNELL WOOLRICH

This is a story you can never forget. It is a tale of terror, of murder in the night, of justice beyond the laws of man. The background is modern Mexico . . . yet its long-dead past, when the Aztecs ruled and Montezuma and Cuauhtemoc were as gods, pushes inexorably into the lives of a beautiful American girl and her infant son. There can be only one result. . . .

Cornell Woolrich, who also writes as William Irish, has no equal as a master of suspense. He piles shock upon shock, thrill upon thrill in a vivid style all his own. His novels have been translated into numerous languages, and many of them made into memorable motion pictures.

THE hired car was very old. The girl in it was very young. They were both American. Which was strange here in this far-off place, this other world, as remote from things American as anywhere could be.

The car was a vintage model, made by some concern whose very name has been forgotten by now; a relic of the Teens or early Twenties, built high and squared-off at the top, like a box on wheels.

It crawled precariously to the top of the long, winding, sharply ascending rutted road — wheezing, gasping, threat-

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ening to slip backward at any moment, but never doing so; miraculously managing even to inch on up.

It stopped at last, opposite what seemed to be a blank, biscuit-colored wall. This had a thick door set into it, but no other openings. A skimpy tendril or two of bougainvillea, burningly mauve, crept downward over its top here and there. There were cracks in the wall, and an occasional place where the plaster facing had fallen off to reveal the adobe underpart.

The girl peered out from the car. Her hair was blonde, her skin fair. She looked unreal in these surroundings of violent color; somehow completely out of key with them. She was extremely tired-looking; there were shadows under her blue eyes. She was holding a very young baby wrapped into a little cone-shaped bundle in a blanket. A baby not more than a few weeks old. And beside the collar of her coat a rosebud was pinned. Scarcely opened, yet dying already. Red as a glowing coal. Or a drop of blood. She looked at the driver, then back to the blank wall again. "Is this where?"

He shrugged. He didn't understand her language. He said something to her. A great deal of something.

She shook her head bewilderedly. His language was as mysterious to her. She consulted the piece of paper she was holding in her hand, then looked again at the place where they'd stopped. "But there's no house here. There's just a wall."

He flicked the little pennant on his meter so that it sprang upright. Underneath it said "7.50". She could read that, at least. He opened the creaking door, to show her what he meant. "Pay me, Señorita. I have to go all the way back to the town."

She got out reluctantly, a forlorn, lost figure. "Wait here," she said. "Wait for me until I find out."

He understood the sense of her faltering gesture. He shook his head firmly. He became very voluble. He had to go back to where he belonged, he had no business being all the way out here. It would be dark soon. His was the only auto in the whole town.

She paid him, guessing at the unfamiliar money she still didn't understand. When he stopped nodding, she stopped giving it to him. There was very little left — a paper bill or two, a handful of coins. She reached in and dragged out a bulky bag and stood that on the ground beside her. Then she turned around and looked at the inscrutable wall.

The car turned creakily and went down the long, rutted road, back into the little town below.

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She was left there, with child, with baggage, with a scrap of paper in her hand. She went over to the door in the wall, looked about for something to ring. There was a short length of rope hanging there against the side of the door. She tugged at it and a bell, the kind with hanging clapper, jangled loosely.

The child opened its eyes momentarily, then closed them again. Blue eyes, like hers.

The door opened, narrowly but with surprising quickness. An old woman stood looking at her. Glittering black eyes, gnarled face the color of tobacco, blue reboso coifed about her head to hide every vestige of hair, one end of the scarf looped rearward over her throat. There was something malignant in the idol-like face, something almost Aztec.

"Señorita wishes?" she breathed suspiciously.

"Can you read?" The girl showed her the scrap of paper. That talisman that had brought her so far.

The old woman touched her eyes, shook her head. She couldn't read.

"But isn't this — isn't this —" Her tired tongue stumbled over the unfamiliar words. "Caminode . . . "

The old woman pointed vaguely in dismissal. "Go, ask them in the town, they can answer your questions there." She tried to close the heavy door again.

The girl planted her foot against it, held it open. "Let me in. I was told to come here. This is the place I was told to come. I'm tired, and I have no place to go." For a moment her face was wreathed in lines of weeping, then she curbed them. "Let me come in and rest a minute until I can find out. I've come such a long way. All night long, that terrible train from Mexico City, and before that the long trip down from the border. . . ." She pushed the door now with her free hand as well as her foot.

"I beg you, Señorita," the old woman said with sullen gravity, "do not enter here now. Do not force your way in here. There has been a death in this house."

"¿Qué pasa?" a younger, higher voice suddenly said, somewhere unseen behind her.

The crone stopped her clawing, turned her head. Suddenly she had whisked from sight as though jerked on a wire, and a young girl had taken her place in the door opening.

The same age as the intruder, perhaps even a trifle younger. Jet-black hair parted arrow-straight along the center of her head. Her skin the color of old ivory. The same glittering black eyes as the old one, but larger, younger. Even more liquid, as though they had recently been

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shedding tears. There was the same cruelty implicit in them too, but not yet as apparent. There was about her whole beauty, and she was beautiful, a tinge of cruelty, of barbarism. That same mask-like Aztec cast of expression, of age-old racial inheritance.

"¿Si?"

"Can you understand me?" the girl pleaded, hoping against hope for a moment.

There was a flash of perfect white teeth, but the black hair moved negatively. "The señorita is lost, perhaps?"

Somehow, the American sensed the meaning of the words. "This is where they told me to come. I inquired in Mexico City. The American consul. They even told me how to get here, what trains. I wrote him, and I never heard. I've been writing him and writing him, and I never heard. But this must be the place. This is where I've been writing, Camino de las Rosas. . . ." A dry sob escaped with the last.

The liquid black eyes had narrowed momentarily. "The señorita looks for who?"

"Bill. Bill Taylor." She tried to turn it into Spanish, with the pitiful resources at her command. "Señor Taylor. Señor Bill Taylor. Look, I'll show you his picture." She fumbled in her handbag, drew out a small snapshot, handed it to the waiting girl. It was a picture of herself and a young man. "Him. I'm looking for him. Now do you understand?"

For a moment there seemed to have been a sharp intake of breath, but it might have been an illusion. The dark-haired girl smiled ruefully. Then she shook her head.

"Don't you know him? Isn't he here? Isn't this his house?" She pointed to the wall alongside. "But it must be. Then whose house is it?"

The dark-haired girl pointed to herself, then to the old woman hovering and hissing surreptitiously in the background. "Casa de nosotros. The house of Chata and her mother. Nobody else."

"Then he isn't here?" The American leaned her back for a moment hopelessly against the wall, turning the other way, to face out from it. She let her head roll a little to one side. "What am I going to do? Where is he, what became of him? I haven't even enough money to go back. I have nowhere to go. They warned me back home not to come down here alone like this, looking for him — oh, I should have listened!"

The black eyes were speculatively narrow again, had been for some time. She pointed to the snapshot. "Hermano? He is the brother of the señorita, or — ?"

The blonde stranger touched her own ring finger. This time the sob came first. "He's my

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husband! I had to pawn my wedding ring, to help pay my way here. I've got to find him! He was going to send for me later — and then he never did."

The black eyes had flicked downward to the child, almost unnoticeably, then up again. Once more she pointed to the snapshot.

The blonde nodded. "It's his. Ours. I don't think he even knows about it. I wrote him, and I never heard back. . . ."

The other's head turned sharply aside for a moment, conferring with the old woman. In profile, her cameo-like beauty was even more expressive. So was the razor-sharpness of its latent cruelty.

Abruptly she had reached out with both hands. "Entra. Entra. Come in. Rest. Refresh yourself." The door was suddenly open at full width, revealing a patio in the center of which was a profusion of white roses. The bushes were not many, perhaps six all told, but they were all in full bloom, weighted down with their masses of flowers. They were arranged in a hollow square. Around the outside ran a border of red-tiled flooring. In the center there was a deep gaping hole — a well, either being dug or being repaired. It was lined with a casing of shoring planks that protruded above its lip. A litter of construction effluvia lay around, lending a transient ugliness to the otherwise beautiful little enclosure: a wheelbarrow, several buckets, a mixing trough, a sack of cement, shovels and picks, and an undulating mound of misplaced earth brought up out of the cavity.

There was no one working at it now, it was too late in the day. Silence hung heavily. In the background was the house proper, its rooms ranged single file about three sides of the enclosure, each one characteristically opening onto it with its own individual doorway. The old houses of Moorish Africa, of which this was a lineal descendant, had been like that: blind to the street, windowless, cloistered, each living its life about its own inner, secretive courtyard. Twice transplanted — first to Spain, then to the newer Spain across the waters.

Now that entry had at last been granted, the blonde girl was momentarily hesitant about entering. "But if — but if this isn't his house, what good is it to come in?"

The insistent hands of the other reached her, drew her, gently but firmly, across the threshhold. In the background the old woman still looked on with a secretive malignancy that might have been due solely to the wizened lines in her face.

"Pase, pase," the dark-haired girl was coaxing her. Step in.

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"Descansa." Rest. She snapped her fingers with sudden, concealed authority behind her own back, and the old woman, seeming to understand the esoteric signal, sidled around to the side of them and out to the road for a moment, looked quickly up the road, then quickly down, picked up the bag standing there and drew it inside with her, leaning totteringly against its weight.

Suddenly the thick wall-door had closed behind her and the blonde wayfarer was in, whether she wanted to be or not.

The silence, the remoteness, was as if a thick, smothering velvet curtain had fallen all at once. Although the road had been empty, the diffuse, imponderable noises of the world had been out there somehow. Although this patio courtyard was unroofed and open to the same evening sky, and only a thick wall separated it from the outside, there was a stillness, a hush, as though it were a thousand miles away, or deep down within the earth.

They led her, one on each side of her — the girl with the slightest of forward-guiding hands just above her waist, the old woman still struggling with the bag — along the red-tiled walk skirting the roses, in under the overhanging portico of the house proper, and in through one of the doorways. It had no door as such; only a curtain of wooden-beaded strings was its sole provision for privacy and isolation. These clicked and hissed when they were stirred. Within were cool plaster walls painted a pastel color halfway up, allowed to remain undyed the rest of the way; an equally cool tiled flooring; an iron bedstead; an ebony chair or two, stiff, tortuously hand-carved, with rush-bottomed seats and backs. A serape of burning emerald and orange stripes, placed on the floor alongside the bed, served as a rug. A smaller one, of sapphire and cerise bands, affixed to the wall, served as the only decoration there was.

They sat her down in one of the chairs, the baby still in her arms. Chata, after a moment's hesitancy, summoned up a sort of defiant boldness, reached out and deliberately removed the small traveling-hat from her head without asking permission. Her expressive eyes widened for a moment, then narrowed again, as they took in the exotic blonde hair in all its unhampered abundance.

Her eyes now went to the child, but more as an afterthought than as if that were her primary interest, and she leaned forward and admired and played with him a little, as women do with a child, any women, of any race. Dabbing her finger at his chin, at his little button of a nose, taking one of

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his little hands momentarily in hers, then relinquishing it again. There was something a trifle mechanical about her playing; there was no real feeling for the child at all.

She said something to the old woman, and the latter came back after a short interval with milk in an earthenware bowl.

"He'll have to drink it with a nipple," the young mother said. "He's too tiny." She handed him for a moment to Chata to hold for her, fumbled with her bag, opened it and got out his feeding-bottle. She poured some of the milk into that, then recapped it and took him up to feed him.

She had caught a curious look on Chata's face in the moment or two she was holding him. As though she were studying the child closely; but not with melting fondness, with a completely detached, almost cold, curiosity.

They remained looking on for a few moments; then they slipped out and left her, the old woman first, Chata a moment later, with a few murmured words and a half-gesture toward the mouth, that she sensed as meaning she was to come and have something to eat with them when she was ready.

She fed him first, and then she turned back the covers and laid him down on the bed. She found two large-size safety-pins in her bag and pinned the covers down tight on either side of him, so that he could not roll off and fall down. His eyes were already closed again, one tiny fist bent backward toward his head. She kissed him softly, with a smothered sob — that was for the failure of the long pilgrimage that had brought her all this way — then tiptoed out.

There was an aromatic odor of spicy cooking hovering disembodiedly about the patio, but just where it was originating from she couldn't determine. Of the surrounding six doorways, three were pitch-black. From one there was a dim, smouldering red glow peering. From another a paler, yellow light was cast subduedly. She mistakenly went toward this.

It was two doors down from the one from which she had just emerged. If they were together in there, they must be talking in whispers. She couldn't hear a sound, not even the faintest murmur.

It had grown darker now; it was full night already, with the swiftness of the mountainous latitudes. The square of sky over the patio was soft and dark as indigo velour, with magnificent stars like many-legged silver spiders festooned on its underside. Below them the white roses gleamed phosphorescently in the starlight, with a magnesium-like glow. There was a tiny splash from the depths of the well as

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a pebble or grain of dislodged earth fell in.

She made her way toward the yellow-ombre doorway. Her attention had been on other things: the starlight, the sheen of the roses; and she turned the doorway and entered the room too quickly, without stopping outside to look in first.

She was already well over the threshhold and in before she stopped short, frozen there, with a stifled intake of fright and an instinctive clutching of both hands toward her throat.

The light came from two pairs of tapers. Between them rested a small bier that was perhaps only a trestled plank shrouded with a cloth. One pair stood at the head of it, one pair at the foot.

On the bier lay a dead child. An infant, perhaps days younger than her own. In fine white robes. Gardenias and white rosebuds disposed about it in impromptu arrangement, to form a little nest or bower. On the wall was a religious image; under it in a red glass cup burned a holy light.

The child lay there so still, as if waiting to be picked up and taken into its mother's arms. Its tiny hands folded on its breast.

She drew a step closer, staring. A step closer, a step closer. Its hair was blond; fair, golden blond.

There was horror lurking in this somewhere. She was suddenly terribly frightened. She took another step, and then another. She wasn't moving her feet, something was drawing them.

She was beside it now. The sickening, cloying odor of the gardenias was swirling about her head like a tide. The infant's little eyes had been closed. She reached down gently, lifted an eyelid, then snatched her hand away. The baby's eyes had been blue.

Horror might have found her then, but it was given no time. She whirled suddenly, not in fright so much as mechanistic nervousness, and Chata was standing motionless in full-center of the doorway, looking in at her.

The black head gave a toss of arrogance. "My child, yes. My little son." And in the flowery language that can express itself as English never can, without the risk of being ridiculous: "The son of my heart." For a moment her face crumbled and a gust of violent emotion swept across it, instantly was gone again.

But it hadn't been grief, it had been almost maniacal rage. The rage of the savage who resents a loss, does not know how to accept it.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know — I didn't mean to come in here —"

"Come, there is some food for

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you," Chata cut her short curtly. She turned on her heel and went down the shadowy arcade toward the other lighted doorway, the more distant one her self-invited guest should have sought out in the first place.

The American went more slowly, turning in the murky afterglow beyond the threshhold to look lingeringly back inside again: I will not think of this for a while. Later, I know, I must, but not now. That in this house where he said he lived there is a child lying dead whose hair is golden, whose eyes were blue.

Chata had reappeared in the designated doorway through which she wanted her to follow, to mark it out for her, to hasten her coming. The American advanced toward it, and went in in turn.

They squatted on the floor to eat, as the Japanese do. The old woman palmed it, and Chata palmed it in turn, to have her do likewise, and to show her where.

She sank awkwardly down as they were, feeling her legs to be too long, but managing somehow to dispose of them with a fanned-out effect to the side. An earthenware bowl of rice and red beans was set down before her.

She felt a little faint for a moment, for the need of food, as the aroma reached her, heavy and succulent. She wanted to crouch down over it, and up-end the entire bowl against her face, to get its entire contents in all at one time.

The old woman handed her a tortilla, a round flat cake, paper-thin, of pestled maize, limp as a wet rag. She held it in her own hand helplessly, did not know what do do with it. They had no eating utensils.

The old woman took it back from her, deftly rolled it into a hollowed tube, returned it. She did with it as she saw them doing with theirs; held the bowl up

closer to her mouth and scooped up the food in it by means of the tortilla.

The food was unaccustomedly piquant; it prickled, baffled the taste-buds of her tongue. A freakish thought from nowhere suddenly flitted through her mind: I should be careful. If they wanted to poison me. . . . And then: But why should they want to harm me? I've done them no harm; my being here

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certainly does them no harm.

And because it held no solid substance, the thought misted away again.

She was so exhausted, her eyes were already drooping closed before the meal was finished. She recovered with a start, and they had both been watching her fixedly. She could tell that by the way fluidity of motion set in again, as happens when people try to cover up the rigid intentness that has just preceded it. Each motion only started as she resumed her observation of it.

"Tienes sueño," Chata murmured. "¿Quieres acostarte?" And she motioned toward the doorway, without looking at it herself.

Somehow the American understood the intention of the words by the fact of the gesture, and the fact that Chata had not risen from the floor herself, but remained squatting. She was not being told to leave the house, she was being told that she might remain within the house and go and lie down with her child if she needed to.

She stumbled to her feet awkwardly, almost threatened to topple for a moment with fatigue. Then steadied herself.

"Gracia," she faltered. "Gracia, mucho." Two pitiful words.

They did not look at her. They were looking down at the emptied food bowls before them. They did not turn their eyes toward her as when somebody is departing from your presence. They kept them on the ground before them as if holding them leashed, waiting for the departure to have been completed.

She draggingly made the turn of the doorway and left them behind her.

The patio seemed to have brightened while she'd been away. It was bleached an almost dazzling white now, with the shadows of the roses and their leaves an equally intense black. Like splotches and drippings of ink beneath each separate component one. Or like a lace mantilla flung open upon a snowdrift.

A raging, glowering full moon had come up, was peering down over the side of the sky-well above the patio.

That was the last thing she saw as she leaned for a moment, inert with fatigue, against the doorway of the room in which her child lay. Then she dragged herself in to topple headlong upon the bed and, already fast asleep, to circle her child with one protective arm, moving as if of its own instinct.

Not the meek, the pallid, gentle moon of home. This was the savage moon that had shone down on Montezuma and Cuauhtemoc, and came back looking for them now. The primitive

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moon that had once looked down on terraced heathen cities and human sacrifices. The moon of Anahuac.

Now the moon of the Aztecs is at the zenith, and all the world lies still. Full and white, the white of bones, the white of a skull; blistering the center of the sky-well with its throbbing, not touching it on any side. Now the patio is a piebald place of black and white, burning in the downward-teeming light. Not a leaf moves, not a petal falls, in this fierce amalgam.

Now the lurid glow from within the brazero has dimmed, and is just a threaded crimson outline against contrasting surfaces, skipping the space in between. It traces, like a fine wire, two figures coifed with rebosos. One against the wall, inanimate, like one of the mummies of her race that used to be sat upright in the rock catacombs. Eyes alone move quick above the mouth-shrouded reboso.

The other teetering slightly to and fro. Ever so slightly, in time to a whispering. A whispering that is like a steady sighing in the night; a whispering that does not come through the muffling rebosos.

The whispering stops. She raises something. A small stone. A whetstone. She spits. She returns it to the floor again. The whispering begins once more. The whispering that is not of the voice, but of a hungry panting in the night. A hissing thirst.

The roses sleep pale upon the blackness of a dream. The haunted moon looks down, lonely for Montezuma and his nation, seeking across the land.

The whispering stops now. The shrouded figure in the center of the room holds out something toward the one propped passive against the wall. Something slim, sharp, grip foremost. The wire-outline from the brazero-mouth finds it for a moment, runs around it like a current, flashes into a momentary highlight, a burnished blur, then runs off it again and leaves it to the darkness.

The other takes it. Her hands go up briefly. The reboso falls away from her head, her shoulders. Two long plaits of dark glossy hair hang down revealed against the copper satin that is now her upper body. Her mouth opens slightly. She places the sharp thing crosswise to it. Her teeth fasten on it. Her hand leaves it there, rigid, immovable.

Her hands execute a swift circling about her head. The two long plaits whip from sight, like snakes scampering to safety amidst rocks. She twines them, tucks them up.

She rises slowly with the grace of unhurried flexibility, back continuing to the wall. She girds her

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skirt up high about her thighs and interlaces it between, so that it holds itself there. Unclothed now, save for a broad swathing about the waist and hips, knife in mouth, she begins to move. Sideward toward the entrance, like a ruddy flame coursing along the wall, with no trace behind it.

Nothing is said. There is nothing to be said.

Nothing was said before. Nothing needed to be said. Dark eyes understood dark eyes. Dark thoughts met dark thoughts and understood, without the need of a word.

Nothing will be said after it is over. Never, not in a thousand days from now, not in a thousand months. Never again.

The old gods never had a commandment not to kill. That was another God in another land. The gods of Anahuac demanded the taking of human life, that was their nature. And who should know better than the gods what its real value is, for it is they who give it in the first place.

The flame is at the doorway now, first erect, then writhing, the way a flame does. Then the figure goes down on hands and knees, low, crouching, for craft, for stealth, for the approach to kill. The big cats in the mountains do it this way, belly-flat, and the tribe of Montezuma did it this way too, half a thousand years ago. And the blood remembers what the heart has never learned. The approach to kill.

On hands and knees the figure comes pacing along beside the wall that flanks the patio, lithe, sinuous, knife in mouth perpendicular to its course. In moonlight and out of it, as each successive archway of the portico circles high above it, comes down to join its support, and is gone again to the rear.

The moon is a caress on supple skin. The moon of Anahuac understands, the moon is in league, the moon will not betray.

Slowly along the portico creeps the death-approach, now borax-white in archway-hemisphere, now clay-blue in slanted support-ephemera. The knife-blade winks, like a little haze-puff of white dust, then the shadow hides it again.

The roses dream, the well lies hushed, not a straggling grain topples into it to mar it. No sound, no sound at all. Along the wall crawls life, bringing an end to life.

Past the opening where the death-tapers burn all night. She doesn't even turn her head as she passes. What is dead is gone. What is dead does not matter any more. There were no souls in Anahuac, just bodies that come to stir, then stop and stir no longer.

What is dead does not matter

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any more. The love of a man, that is what matters to a woman. If she has not his child, she cannot hold his love. If she loses his child, then she must get another.

And now the other entrance is coming nearer as the wraith-like figure creeps on. Like smoke, like mist, flickering along at the base of a wall. It seems to move of its own accord, sidling along the wall as if it were a black slab or panel traveling on hidden wheels or pulleys at the end of a draw-cord. Coming nearer all the time, black, coffin-shaped, against the bluish-pale wall. Growing taller, growing wider, growing greater.

And then a sound, a small night sound, a futile, helpless sound — a child whimpers slightly in its sleep.

But instantly the figure stops, crouched. Is as still as if it had never moved a moment ago, would never move again. Not a further ripple, not a fluctuation, not a belated muscular contraction, not even the pulsing of breath. As the mountain lioness would stop as it stalked an alerted kill.

The child whimpers troubledly again. It is having a dream perhaps. Something, someone, stirs. Not the child. A heavier, a larger body than the child. There is a faint rustling, as when someone turns against overlying covers.

Then the sibilance of a soothing, bated voice, making a hushing sound. "Sh-h-h. Sh-h-h." Vibrant with a light motion. The motion of rocking interfolded arms.

A drowsy murmur of words, almost inchoate. "Sleep, darling. We'll find your daddy soon."

The moon glares down patiently, remorselessly, waiting. The moon will wait. The night will wait.

Seconds of time pass. Breathing sounds from within the doorway on the stillness now, in soft, slow, rhythmic waves. With little ripples in the space between each wave. Breathing of a mother, and elfin echo of her arm-cradled child. The shadow moves along the wall.

The open doorway, from within, would be a sheet of silver or of mercury, thin but glowing, if any eye were open there upon it. Then suddenly, down low at its base, comes motion, comes intrusion. A creeping, curved thing circles the stone wall-breadth, loses itself again in the darkness on the near side. Now once again the opening is an unmarred sheet of silver, fuming, sheeny.

Not even a shadow glides along the floor now, for there is no longer light to shape one. Nothing. Only death moving in invisibility.

The unseen current of the breathing still rides upon the

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darkness, to and fro, to and fro; lightly upon the surface of the darkness, like an evanescent pool of water stirring this way and that way.

Then suddenly it plunges deep, as if an unexpected vent, an outlet, had been driven through for it, gurgling, swirling, hollowing and sinking in timbre. A deep, spiralling breath that is the end of all breaths. No more than that. Then evaporation, the silence of death, in an arid, a denuded place.

The breathing of the child peers through again in a moment, now that its overshadowing counterpoint has been erased. It is taken up by other arms. Held pressed to another breast.

In the room of the smouldering brazero the other figure waits; patient, head inclined, reboso-coifed. The soft pad of bare feet comes along the patio-tiles outside, exultant-quick. No need to crawl now. There are no longer other ears to overhear. Bare feet, proud and graceful; coolly firm, like bare feet wading through the moon-milk.

She comes in triumphant, erect and willowy, holding something in her arms, close to her breast. What a woman is supposed to hold. What a woman is born to hold.

She sinks down there on her knees before the other, the other who once held her thus in turn. She turns her head slightly in indication, holds it bent awkwardly askance, for her hands are not free. The old woman's hands go to her coil-wound hair, trace to the back of her head, draw out the knife for her.

Before her on the floor stands an earthenware bowl holding water. The knife splashes into it. The old woman begins to scrub and knead its blade dexterously between her fingers.

The younger one, sitting at ease now upon the backs of her heels, frees one hand, takes up the palm-leaf, fans the brazero to a renewed glow. Scarlet comes back into the room, then vermillion. Even light orange, in splashes here and there, upon their bodies and their faces.

She speaks, staring with copper-plated mask into the orange maw of the brazero. "My man has a son again. I have his son again. I will not lose my man now."

"You have done well, my daughter. You have done as a woman should." Thus a mother's approbation to her daughter, in olden Anahuac.

She places the baby's head to her breast, the new-made mother, and begins to suckle him.

The moon of Montezuma, well-content, is on the wane now, slanting downward on the opposite side of the patio. Such sights as these it once knew well in

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Anahuac; now its hungering loneliness has been in a measure assuaged, for it has glimpsed them once again.

The moon has gone now; it is the darkness before dawn. Soon the sun will come, the cosmic male-force. The time of women is rapidly ending, the time of men will be at hand.

They are both in the room with the trestle bier and the flowers and the gold-tongued tapers. The little wax doll is a naked wax doll now, its wrappings taken from it, cast aside. Lumpy, foreshortened, like a squat clay image fashioned by the soft-slapping hands of some awkward, unpractised potter.

The old woman is holding a charcoal sack, black-smudged, tautly wide at its mouth. She brings it up just under the bier, holds it steady, in the way of a catch-all.

Chata's hands reach out, scoop, roll something toward her.

The bier is empty and the charcoal sack has swelled full at the bottom.

The old woman quickly folds it over and winds it about itself. She passes it to Chata. Deft swirling and tightening of Chata's reboso about her own figure, and it has gone, and Chata's arms with it, hidden within.

The old woman takes apart the bier. Takes down the two pitiful planks from the trestles that supported them. A gardenia-petal or two slides down them to the floor.

"Go far," she counsels knowingly.

"I will go far up the mountain, where it is bare. Where the buzzards can see it easily from overhead. By the time the sun goes down it will be gone. Small bones like this they will even carry up with them and scatter."

The old woman pinches one taper-wick and it goes out.

She moves on toward another and pinches that.

Darkness blots the room. In the air a faint trace of gardenias remains. How long does the scent of gardenias last? How long does life last? And when each has gone, where is it each has gone?

They move across the moonless patio now, one back of the other. The wooden door in the street wall jars and creaks back aslant. The old woman sidles forth. Chata waits. The old woman reinserts herself. Her finger flicks permissive safety toward the aperture.

The girl slips out, just an Indian girl enswathed, a lump under her reboso, the margin of it drawn up over her mouth against the unhealthful night air.

It is daybreak now. Clay-blue and dove-gray, rapidly paling with white. The old woman is sitting crouched upon her haunches, in patient immobility, just within the door.

She must have heard an almost

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wraith-like footfall that no other ears could have caught. She rose suddenly. She waited a bated moment, inclined toward the door, then she unfastened and swung open the door.

Chata slipped in on the instant, reboso flat against her now. No more lump saddling her hip.

The old woman closed the door, went after her to deeper recesses of the patio. "You went far?"

Chata unhooded her reboso from head and shoulders with that negligent racial grace she was never without. "I went far. I went up where it is bare rock. Where no weed grows that will hide it from the sailing wings in the sky. They will see it. Already they were coming from afar as I looked back from below. By sundown it will be gone."

The old woman nodded. "You have done well, my daughter," she praised her dignifiedly.

Beside the well in the patio there was something lying now. Another mound beside the mound of disinterred earth. And alongside it, parallel to one side of the well, a deep narrow trough lay dug, almost looking like a grave.

The rose bushes had all been pulled out and lay there expiring on their sides now, roots striking skyward like frozen snakes.

"They were in the way," the old woman grunted. "I had to. I deepened it below where they left it when they were here last. The new earth I took out is apart, over there, in that smaller pile by itself. So we will know it from the earth they took out when they were last here. See, it is darker and fresher."

"He liked them," Chata said. "He will ask why it is, when he comes back."

"Tell him the men did it, Fulgencio and his helper."

"But if he asks them, when he goes to pay them for the work, they will say they did not, they left them in."

"Then we will plant them in again, lightly at the top, before they come back to resume their work. I will cut off their roots short, so that it can be done."

"They will die that way."

The old woman nodded craftily. "But only after a while. He will see them still in place, though dead. Then we will say it was the work of the men did it. Then Fulgencio and his helper will not be able to say they did not do it. For they were alive when the work began, and they will be dead when it was done."

Chata did not have to ask her to help. With one accord, with no further words between them, they went to the mound beside the mound of earth. The mound that was not earth. The mound that was concealing rags and bundled charcoal sacking. One went to one end, one to the other. Chata pried

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into the rags for a moment, made an opening, peered into it. It centered on a red rosebud, withered and falling apart, but still affixed by a pin to the dark-blue cloth of a coat.

"She wore a rose upon her coat," she hissed vengefully. "I saw it when she came in last night. She must have brought it with her from Tapatzingo, for there are none of that color growing here. He must have liked to see them on her." She swerved her head and spat into the trough alongside. "It is dead now," she said exultingly.

"As she is," glowered the old woman, tight-lipped.

"Let it go with her, for the worms to see."

They both scissored their arms, and the one mound overturned and dropped, was engulfed by the other. Then Chata took up the shovel the workmen had left, and began lessening the second mound, the mound that was of earth. She knew just what they did and how they went about it, she had watched them for so many days now. The old woman, spreading her reboso flat upon the ground nearby, busied herself palming and urging the newer fill over onto it, the fill that she herself had taken out to make more depth.

When it was filled, she tied the corners into a bundle and carried it from sight. She came back with the reboso empty and began over again. After the second time, the pile of new fill was gone.

Chata had disappeared from the thighs down, was moving about as in a grave, trampling, flattening, with downbeating of her feet.

In midmorning, when Fulgencio and his nephew came, languid, to their slow-moving work, the white roses were all luxuriating around the well again, with a slender stick lurking here and there to prop them. Everything was as it had been. If the pile of disinterred earth they had left was a little lower, or if the depression waiting to take it back was a little shallower, who could tell? Who measured such things?

The old woman brought out a jug of pulque to them, so that they might refresh themselves. Their eyes were red when they left at sundown, and their breaths and their sweat were sour. But it had made their work go quicker, with snatches of song, and with laughter, and with stumblings of foot. And it had made the earth they shoveled back, the hollow they filled, the tiles they cemented back atop, the roses they brushed against and bent, all dance and blur in fumes of maguey.

But the task was completed, and when the door was closed upon their swaying, drooping-lidded forms, they needed to come back no more.

Seven times the sun rises, seven times it falls. Then fourteen. Then,

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perhaps, twenty-one. Who knows, who counts it? Hasn't it risen a thousand years in Anahuac, to fall again, to rise again?

Then one day, in its declining hours, there is a heavy knocking of men's hands on the outside of the wooden door in the street-wall. The hands of men who have a right to enter, who may not be refused; their knocking tells that.

They know it for what it is at first sound, Chata and the old woman. They have known it was coming. There is another law in Anahuac now than the old one.

Eyes meet eyes. The trace of a nod is exchanged. A nod that confirms. That is all. No fear, no sudden startlement. No fear, because no sense of guilt. The old law did not depend on signs of fear, proofs and evidences, witnesses. The old law was wise, the new law is a fool.

The old woman struggles to her feet, pads forth across the patio toward the street-door, resounding now like a drum. Chata remains as she was, dexterously plaiting withes into a basket, golden-haired child on its back on the sun-cozened ground beside her, little legs fumbling in air.

The old woman comes back with two of mixed blood. Anahuac is in their faces, but so is the other race, with its quick mobility of feature that tells every thought. One in uniform of those who enforce the law, one in attire such as Chata's own man wears when he has returned from his prospecting trips in the distant mountains and walks the streets of the town with her on Sunday, or takes his ease without her in the cantina with the men of the other women.

They come and stand over her, where she squats at her work, look down on her. Their shadows shade her, blot out the sun in the corner of the patio in which she is. Are like thick blue stripes blanketing her and the child from some intangible serape.

Slowly her eyes go upward to them, liquid, dark, grave, respectful but not afraid, as a woman's do to strange men who come where she has a right to be.

"Stand. We are of the police. From Tapatzingo, on the other side of the mountain. We are here to speak to you."

She puts her basket-weaving aside and rises, graceful, unfrightened.

"And you are?" the one who speaks for the two of them, the one without uniform, goes on.

"Chata."

"Any last name?"

"We use no second name among us." That is the other race, two names for every one person.

"And the old one?"

"Mother of Chata."

"And who is the man here?"

"In the mountains. That way, far that way. He goes to look for silver. He works it when he finds

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it. He has been long gone, but he will come soon now, the time is drawing near."

"Now listen. A woman entered here, some time three weeks ago. A woman with a child. A norteña, a gringa, understand? One of those from up there. She has not been seen again. She did not go back there to where she came from. To the great City of Mexico. In the City of Mexico the consul of her country has asked the police to find out where she is. The police of the City of Mexico have asked us to learn what became of her."

Both heads shake. "No. No woman entered here."

He turns to the one in uniform. "Bring him in a minute."

The hired-car driver shuffles forward, escorted by the uniform.

Chata looks at him gravely, no more. Gravely but untroubledly.

"This man says he brought her here. She got out. He went back without her."

Both heads nod now. The young one that their eyes are on, the old one disregarded in the background.

"There was a knock upon our door, one such day, many days ago. A woman with a child stood there, from another place. She spoke, and we could not understand her speech. She showed us a paper, but we cannot read writing. We closed the door. She did not knock again."

He turns on the hired-car driver. "Did you see them admit her?"

"No, Señor," the latter falters, too frightened to tell anything but the truth. "I only let her out somewhere along here. I did not wait to see where she went. It was late, and I wanted to get back to my woman. I had driven her all the way from Tapatzingo, where the train stops."

"Then you did not see her come in here?"

"I did not see her go in anywhere. I turned around and went the other way, and it was getting dark."

"This child here, does it look like the one she had with her?"

"I could not see it, she held it to her."

"This is the child of my man," Chata says with sultry dignity. "He has yellow hair like this. Tell, then."

"Her man is gringo, everyone has seen him. She had a gringo child a while ago, everyone knows that," the man stammers unhappily.

"Then you, perhaps, know more about where she went, than these two do! You did bring her out this way! Take him outside and hold him. At least I'll have something to report on."

The policeman drags him out again, pleading and whining. "No, Señor, no! I do not know — I drove back without her! For the

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love of God, Señor, the love of God!"

He turns to Chata. "Show me this house. I want to see it."

She shows it to him, room by room. Rooms that know nothing, can tell nothing. Then back to the patio again. The other one is waiting for him there, alone now.

"And this pozo? It seems cleaner, newer, this tiling, than elsewhere around it." He taps his foot on it.

"It kept falling in, around the sides. Cement was put around them to hold the dirt back."

"Who had it done?"

"It was the order of my man, before he left. It made our water bad. He told two men to do it for him while he was away."

"And who carried it out?"

"Fulgencio and his nephew, in the town. They did not come right away, and they took long, but finally they finished."

He jotted the name. "We will ask."

She nodded acquiescently. "They will tell."

He takes his foot off it at last, moves away. He seems to be finished, he seems to be about to go. Then suddenly, curtly, "Come." And he flexes his finger for her benefit.

For the first time her face shows something. The skin draws back rearward of her eyes, pulling them oblique.

"Where?" she whispers.

"To the town. To Tapatzingo. To the headquarters."

She shakes her head repeatedly, mutely appalled. Creeps backward a step with each shake. Yet even now it is less than outright fear; it is more an unreasoning obstinacy. An awe in the face of something one is too simple to understand. The cringing of a wide-eyed child.

"Nothing will happen to you," he says impatiently. "You won't be held. Just to sign a paper. A statement for you to put your name to."

Her back has come to rest against one of the archway supports now. She can retreat no further. She cowers against it, then sinks down, then turns and clasps her arms about it, holding onto it in desperate appeal.

"I cannot write. I do not know how to make those marks."

He is standing over her now, trying to reason with her.

"Valgame dios! What a criatura!"

She transfers her embrace suddenly from the inanimate pilaster to his legs, winding her arms about them in supplication.

"No, patrón, no! Don't take me to Tapatzingo! They'll keep me there. I know how they treat our kind. I'll never get back again."

Her eyes plead upward at him, dark pools of mournfulness.

He looks more closely at her, as

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if seeming to see her face for the first time. Or at least as if seeming to see it as a woman's face and not just that of a witness.

"And you like this gringo you house with?" he remarks at a tangent. "Why did you not go with one of your own?"

"One goes with the man who chooses one."

"Women are thus," he admits patronizingly. Asi son las mujeres.

She releases his pinioned legs, but still crouches at his feet, looking questioningly upward.

He is still studying her face. "He could have done worse." He reaches down and wags her chin a little with two pinched fingers.

She rises, slowly turns away from him. She does not smile. Her coquetry is more basic than the shallow superficiality of a smile. More gripping in its pull. It is in the slow, enfolding way she draws her reboso tight about her and hugs it to her shoulders and her waist. It is in the very way she walks. It is in the coalescing of the sunlit dust-motes all about her in the air as she passes, forming almost a haze, a passional halo.

In fact, she gives him not another look. Yet every step of the way she pulls his eyes with her. And as she passes where a flowering plant stands in a green glazed mould, she tears one of the flowers off. She doesn't drop it, just carries it along with her in her hand.

She approaches one of the room-openings, and still without turning, still without looking back, goes within.

He stands there staring at the empty doorway.

The old woman squats down by the child, takes it up, and lowers her head as if attentively waiting.

He looks at the policeman, and the policeman at him, and everything that was unspoken until now is spoken in that look between them.

"Wait for me outside the house. I'll be out later."

The policeman goes outside and closes the wall-door after him.

Later she comes out of the room by herself, ahead of the man. She rejoins the old woman and child, and squats down by them on her knees and heels. The old woman passes the child into her arms. She rocks it lullingly, looks down at it protectively, touches a speck from its brow with one finger. She is placid, self-assured.

Then the man comes out again. He is tracing one side of his mustache with the edge of one finger.

He comes and stops, standing over her, as he did when he and the other one first came in here.

He smiles a little, very sparingly, with only the corner of his mouth. Half-indulgently, half-contemptuously.

He speaks. But to whom?

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Scarcely to her, for his eyes go up over her, stare thoughtfully over her head; and the policeman isn't present to be addressed. To his own sense of duty, perhaps, reassuring it. "Well — you don't need to come in, then, most likely. You've told me all you can. No need to question you further. I can attend to the paper myself. And we always have the driver, anyway, if they want to go ahead with it."

He turns on his heel. His long shadow undulates off her.

"Adios, india," he flings carelessly at her over his shoulder, from the wall-door.

"Adios, patrón," she murmurs obsequiously.

The old woman goes over to the door in his wake, to make sure it is shut fast from the inside. Comes back, sinks down again.

Nothing is said.

In the purple bloodshed of a sunset afterglow, the tired horse brings its tired rider to a halt before the biscuit-colored wall with the bougainvillea unravelling along it. Having ridden the day, having ridden the night, and many days and many nights, the ride is at last done.

For a moment they stand there, both motionless, horse with its neck slanted to ground, rider with his head dropped almost to saddle-grip. He has been riding asleep for the past hour or so. But riding true, for the horse knows the way.

Then the man stirs, raises his head, slings his leg off, comes to the ground. Face mahogany from the high sierra sun, golden glisten filming its lower part, like dust of that other metal, the one even more precious than that he seeks and lives by. Dust-paled shirt opened to the navel. Service automatic of another country, of another army, that both once were his, bedded at his groin. Bulging saddle-bags upon the burro tethered behind, of ore, of precious crushed rock, to be taken to the assay office down at Tapatzingo. Blue eyes that have forgotten all their ties, and thus will stay young as they are now forever. Bill Taylor's home. Bill Taylor, once of Iowa, once of Colorado.

Home? What is home? Home is where a house is that you come back to when the rainy season is about to begin, to wait until the next dry season comes around. Home is where your woman is, that you come back to in the intervals between a greater love — the only real love — the lust for riches buried in the earth, that are your own if you can find them.

Perhaps you do not call it home, even to yourself. Perhaps you call them "my house", "my woman". What if there was another "my house", "my woman", before this one? It makes no difference. This woman is enough for now.

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Perhaps the guns sounded too loud at Anzio or at Omaha Beach, at Guadalcanal or at Okinawa. Perhaps when they stilled again some kind of strength had been blasted from you that other men still have. And then again perhaps it was some kind of weakness that other men still have. What is strength, what is weakness, what is loyalty, what is perfidy?

The guns taught only one thing, but they taught it well: of what consequence is life? Of what consequence is a man? And, therefore, of what consequence if he tramples love in one place and goes to find it in the next? The little moment that he has, let him be at peace, far from the guns and all that remind him of them.

So the man who once was Bill Taylor has come back to his house, in the dusk, in the mountains, in Anahuac.

He doesn't have to knock, the soft hoof-plod of his horse has long ago been heard, has sent its long-awaited message. Of what use is a house to a man if he must knock before he enters? The door swings wide, as it never does and never will to anyone but him. Flitting of a figure, firefly-quick, and Chata is entwined about him.

He goes in, faltering a little from long weariness, from long disuse of his legs, she welded to his side, half-supporting, already resting, restoring him, as is a woman's reason for being.

The door closes behind them. She palms him to wait, then whisks away.

He stands there, looking about.

She comes back, holding something bebundled in her arms.

"What happened to the roses?" he asks dimly.

She does not answer. She is holding something up toward him, white teeth proudly displayed in her face. The one moment in a woman's whole life. The moment of fulfilment. "Your son," she breathes dutifully.

Who can think of roses when he has a son?

Two of the tiles that Fulgencio had laid began to part. Slowly. So slowly who could say they had not always been that way? And yet they had not. Since they could not part horizontally because of the other tiles all around them, their parting was vertical, they began to slant upward out of true. At last the strain became too great. They had no resiliency by which to slant along the one side, remain flat along the other. They cracked along the line of greatest strain, and then they crumbled there, disintegrated into a mosaic. And then the smaller, lighter pieces were disturbed still more, and finally lay about like scattered pebbles, out of their original bed.

And then it began to grow. The new rosebush.

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There had been rosebushes there before. Why should there not be one there now again?

It was full-grown now, the new rosebush. And he had gone and come again, Bill Taylor; and gone, and come again. Then suddenly, in the time for roses to bloom, it burst into flower. Like a splattering of blood, drenching that one particular part of the patio. Every rose as red as the heart.

He smiled with pleasant surprise when he first saw it, and he said how beautiful it was. He called to her and made her come out there where he was and stand beside him and take the sight in.

"Look. Look what we have now. I always liked them better than the white ones."

"I already saw them," she said sullenly. "You are only seeing them now for the first time, but I saw them many days ago, coming through little by little."

And she tried to move away, but he held her there by the shoulder, in command. "Take good care of it now. Water it. Treat it well."

In a few days he noticed that the sun was scorching it, that the leaves were burning here and there.

He called her out there, and his face was dark. His voice was harsh and curt, as when you speak to a disobedient dog. "Didn't I tell you to look after this rosebush? Why haven't you? Water it now! Water it well!"

She obeyed him. She had to. But as she moved about it, tending to it, on her face, turned from him, there was the ancient hatred of woman for woman, when there is but one man between the two of them.

She watered it the next day, and the next. It throve, it flourished, jeering at her with liquid diamonds dangling from each leaf, and pearls of moisture rolling lazily about the crevices of its tight-packed satin petals. And when his eyes were not upon her, and she struck at it viciously with her hand, it bit back at her, and tore a drop of blood from her palm.

Of what use to move around the ground on two firm feet, to be warm, to be flesh, if his eyes scarce rested on you any more? Or if they did, no longer saw you as they once had, but went right through you as if you were not there?

Of what use to have buried her in the ground if he stayed now always closer to her than to you, moving his chair now by her out there in the sun? If he put his face down close to her and inhaled the memory of her and the essence of her soul?

She filled the patio with her sad perfume, and even in the very act of breathing in itself, he drew

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something of her into himself, and they became one.

She held sibilant conference with the old woman beside the brazero in the evening as they prepared his meal. "It is she. She has come back again. He puts his face down close, down close to her many red mouths, and she whispers to him. She tries to tell him that she lies there, she tries to tell him that his son was given him by her and not by me."

The old woman nodded sagely. These things are so. "Then you must do again as you did once before. There is no other way."

"He will be angered as the thunder rolling in a mountain gorge."

"Better a blow from a man's hand than to lose him to another woman."

Again the night of a full moon, again she crept forth, hands to ground, as she had once before. This time from his very side, from his very bed. Again a knife between her teeth blazed intermittently in the moonlight. But this time she didn't creep sideward along the portico, from room-entry to room-entry; this time she paced her way straight outward into mid-patio. And this time her reboso was twined tight about her, not cast off; for the victim had no ears with which to hear her should the garment impede or betray; and the victim had no feet on which to start up and run away.

Slowly she toiled and undulated under the enormous spotlight of the moon. Nearer, nearer. Until the shadows of the little leaves made black freckles on her back.

Nearer, nearer. To kill a second time the same rival.

Nearer, nearer. To where the rosebush lay floating on layers of moon-smoke.

They found her the next morning, he and the old woman. They found the mute evidences of the struggle there had been; like a contest between two active agencies, between two opposing wills. A struggle in the silent moonlight.

There was a place where the tiled surfacing, the cement shoring, faultily applied by the pulque-drugged Fulgencio and his nephew, had given way and dislodged itself over the lip of the well and down into it, as had been its wont before the repairs were applied. Too much weight incautiously brought too near the edge, in some terrible, oblivious throe of fury or of self-preservation.

Over this ravage the rosebush, stricken, gashed along its stem, stretched taut, bent like a bow; at one end its manifold roots still clinging tenaciously to the soil, like countless crooked grasping fingers; at the other its flowered head, captive but unsubdued, dipping downward into the mouth of the well.

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And from its thorns, caught fast in a confusion hopeless of extrication, it supported two opposite ends of the reboso, whipped and wound and spiralled together into one, from some aimless swaying and counter-swaying weight at the other end.

A weight that had stopped swaying long before the moon waned; that hung straight and limp now, hugging the wall of the well. Head sharply askew, as if listening to the mocking voice whispering through from the soil alongside, where the roots of the rosebush found their source.

No water had touched her. She had not died the death of water. She had died the death that comes without a sound, the death that is like the snapping of a twig, of a broken neck.

They lifted her up. They laid her tenderly there upon the ground.

She did not move. The rosebush did; it slowly righted to upward. Leaving upon the ground a profusion of petals, like drops of blood shed in combat.

The rosebush lived, but she was dead.

Now he sits there in the sun, by the rosebush; the world forgotten, other places that once were home, other times, other loves, forgotten. It is good to sit there in the sun, your son playing at your feet. This is a better love, this is the only lasting love. For a woman dies when you do, but a son lives on. He is you and you are he, and thus you do not die at all.

And when his eyes close in the sun and he dozes, as a man does when his youth is running out, perhaps now and then a petal will fall upon his head or upon his shoulder from some near-curving branch, and lie there still. Light as a caress. Light as a kiss unseen from someone who loves you and watches over you.

The old woman squats at hand, watchful over the child. The old woman has remained, ignored. Like a dog, like a stone. Unspeaking and unspoken to.

Her eyes reveal nothing. Her lips say nothing. They will never say anything, for thus it is in Anahuac.

But the heart knows. The skies that look forever down on Anahuac know. The moon knows.

▲

TRUE science teaches, above all, to doubt and to be ignorant.

— Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*

FEW congressmen have seen an atomic explosion, but all have felt the hot breath of angry voters.

— Rep. Thomas Steed (Okla., D.)

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Cartoon: Mendoza

"Oh I say, not in the sherry!"

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Illustrator: Emsh

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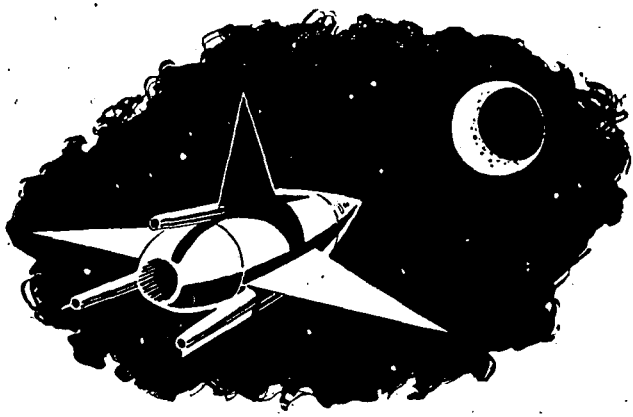

THE MISSING SYMBOL

BY IVAR JORGENSEN

Remember the song that starts, "Off we go, into the wild blue yonder —"? Well, very soon now some changes will have to be made in it. For the flyboys who take up the first rocketship will learn how vast, how very, very black *outer space is going to be. Even worse, there are bound to be many factors which weren't even dreamed of when the big gamble was mapped out!*

Anyway, that's the basis for The Missing Symbol. It takes a writer of real ability and a solid understanding of human nature to do justice to such a theme. We hope you'll agree with us that Ivar Jorgensen was the right man for the job.

CONNORS looked at the moving second hand on the dial board. "Zero minus five," he said, and the warning went through the sleek silver bullet of a ship to the other four men aboard. Connors bit down hard on the stem of his pipe. Out beyond in the hills twenty thousand people watched the high-riding *Rachel II*, would-be queen of the spaceways — waited for her to slap the earth with a fiery tail and try a jump to the moon. Her predecessor, *Rachel I*, had been nothing but a rocket. *Rachel I* had gone alone to the moon with a warhead in her nose so the telescopes could pick out the blast when she landed. So there

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was a small hole right in the middle of one of the craters and now here was *Rachel II* — the business — the real thing — ready to blast off.

It hardly seemed a time for retrospect, but Connors was that kind of a man. He needed no special time: *First it was hairy men in skins looking up at a yellow ball in the sky and wondering why it turned into a sliver and disappeared every so often. After they quit wearing the skins they found out, but they weren't satisfied with that. They had to formulate a lot of equations and chew their nails down waiting for a fuel to drive a space ship and here we are.* Connors grinned without mirth and put down his dead pipe. *Let's hope they got all the symbols into those equations. All we're doing is riding a piece of paper to the moon.*

"Zero minus four."

Withington, the fuel man, wiped sweat from his palms on the leather-covered arms of his chair. In a damn short time he'd tilt the chair back ninety degrees and sit facing the ceiling. There would be a big whoosh that might jerk his back teeth out, but the stress-and-strain boys had used pencil and paper to prove it wouldn't kill him. Withington sensed the almost half-million eyes glued on the outer shell and thought of Helen: *She'll be all right. Even if the worst happens there'll be the insurance. One hundred thousand tax-free. She'll be all right. But I wonder how soon she'll forget and be ready for another man?*

"Zero minus three."

Barton, the tube chief, rubbed a rag over the gleaming chrome cover of a jet-test cell. He glanced across at his sponge-rubber chair. But he still had three minutes. He kept on wiping the chrome: *I was lucky! Jeez, I was lucky. Seven years ago in a stinking garage and now here I am on the first ship to the moon. They're all home watching the ship on video. Jeez, I'll bet they're proud.* Barton did a little cakewalk, then raised a hand toward the east and laughed. *Look Ma! I'm dancing!*

"Zero minus two."

Griffith sat in his chair looking lazily at the ceiling. He'd already angled it and he gripped the arms until his fingers ached: *I'm not scared. I mean, I'm not a coward. Anybody would be scared in a spot like this. But you're not a coward as long as you face it. You can't help how you feel. I'm not a coward but I'm glad nobody's around to see.* He wiped the sweat from his eyes and tightened his grip on the chair arms.

"Zero minus one."

Purdy had been picking his teeth. He put the toothpick into his pocket and went over and got into his chair. He fastened the safety belt, angled the chair, looked at the bolts on the ceiling: *Man! That blonde was sure all*

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woman. And I had to go get drunk. Purdy, you're a damn fool! You deserve to go roost on the moon.

"Zero!"

A great red bloom spread over the desert flats and the *Rachel II* rode the bloom up off the earth. The great crowd roared in approval. Then a man yelled "There she goes," and a lot of people thought they saw the ship. But they didn't. She was too far away.

Connors rammed the heel of his hand against the side of his head to stop the buzzing. Then he straightened away and said, "Roll call. All stations. Withington?"

"Withington okay."

"Barton?"

"Barton okay."

"Griffith?"

"Griffith — fine sir."

"Purdy."

"Purdy — all teeth in place."

"Fine." Connors took a long printed form from a drawer, laid it on his desk and unsnapped his pen. "Let's check instruments."

Fifteen minutes later, with all reports in, he was satisfied. "Set the automatics and meet in the lounge."

Connors got there first and watched them file in one by one. Oddly, nothing was said until Connors had poured the drinks and raised his glass. "To the luck we've had — and the luck we'll need."

They drank and Griffith was the first to speak. "But it really isn't luck, sir. Is it? You've got to give them credit back there. They knew before we started. They told us, and it was just like they said."

Purdy had wandered to an observation port. "You said it, kid. The first time I ever felt like kissing one of those geniuses. I'm glad there's none around."

The talk continued and gradually the tension subsided. Finally Connors said, "It looks as though the worst is over. From now on our main problem will be boredom. We'll have our routine and it must be maintained. Only a week, of course, but it may seem a lot longer."

Barton, red-faced and grinning, said, "It's kind of a let-down, isn't it? Somehow, I hate to admit those equation boys were so right. They added it all up and got the answers in an arm-chair. Not a symbol missing."

"It looks that way," Withington said. "I sure hope there's nothing they overlooked."

And for twenty-four hours it was that way. Only boredom to look forward to and contend with.

During the twenty-fifth hour, boredom was no longer the problem. It began at breakfast when only four men reported. Connors asked, "Has anyone seen Griffith?"

No one had.

"Must have overslept," and

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Connors left the dining room. He went down the companionway and knocked on a door. "Griffith! Rise and shine."

There was no response. Connors called again and tried the knob. Locked. "Griffith!"

"You get the hell away from that door!"

"What's wrong? Are you sick?"

"I said get the hell away from that door. You ain't going to kill me! You try to get in here, I'll get you first! I swear I'll get you first!"

"Griffith! What's the matter with you? Nobody's trying to kill you. Open that door." There was the sound of sobbing from beyond the steel panel.

Then Griffith, speaking more to himself than to Connors: "What am I gonna do? I gotta eat! I'll starve to death! And them bastards waiting for me — waiting to cut me down —"

"Griffith! For God's sake!"

"Why don't you let him alone?" Connors whirled to find himself facing Purdy. But Purdy had changed. The good-natured grin was now a snarl. And he stood crouched, tense, waiting.

"What's got into *you?*"

"Never mind about me. Just lay off the little guys! If you're looking for trouble come and see me. I've bumped into your kind before. I bump into 'em and let 'em lay!"

Connors brought up his right hand in a quick gesture Purdy evidently misinterpreted. The latter leaped in and slammed a jarring straight left against Connors' jaw. Connors went down.

Held prone by amazement more than injury, Connors saw Purdy lunge forward to follow up his advantage. Connors rolled over and sought to come to his feet, tensing himself for the expected blow.

In its place came footsteps and the sound of renewed violence. Connors got up to find Barton glued like a leech to Purdy's broad back, screaming and clawing at his face. Connors took a step toward them just as Purdy hurled Withington to the floor. Purdy swayed for a moment, off balance, and Connors got him flush on the jaw with a right. Purdy dropped like a felled steer.

Connors, dizzy, leaned momentarily against the wall. He saw Withington get up slowly, saw Withington's eyes on him; eyes filled with a mixture of hatred and fear. Then Withington backed slowly away as though he expected Connors to turn into a cobra and strike out at him. Four steps backward — then Withington turned and fled.

Connors stood for a long minute staring after Withington. Then he turned and faced Griffith's door. A sneer twisted his face. He said, "Come on out, you little bastard, and I'll break your neck!"

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The ship drove on through void. But it was a strange ship now. The routine, strangely enough, was not interrupted. The men did their work, but only because individual safety made it imperative. Each man did his job to get *himself* to the moon, not anybody else. There were no alliances among them, yet the group never stood by and let one member kill another.

Purdy beat Griffith insensible, but the rest dragged him off before he could complete the job. Yet no individual helped Griffith. He was merely given a respite until he came to and crawled to his cabin. When he emerged again he was fair game in this metal jungle that raced across the sky.

Connors gave orders over the intercom and they were obeyed. He got reports from surly-voiced men. And he sat long hours, pondering, in his chart room. In his mind were two forces forever battling; his hatred of the crew and all mankind, and a reasoning sanity-center that continually asked questions.

The hatred: *God-damn them all! What sort of a fool was I to trap myself with four maniacs. Thank heaven the guns are under time-lock. That Barton would have shot me in the back long ago. No he wouldn't! I'd have gotten him first, the stinking swine. I'd have gotten them all! I'm captain of this tub and I'll make them know it.*

The reason: *It's not too hard to figure out. The equation boys weren't so smart after all. They have a symbol for everything. All the metals and the fuel components and everything else. But the symbol for the human brain — the mind of man — is missing! They weren't so smart about that. They know what a sheet of steel will withstand; the stress and strain on a jet tube. They know that down to a gnat's eyebrow. But what about the stress and strain on the human mind? On the man that rides the ship? Space does something to him, and they missed it completely.*

But even though he could reason it out, the thing itself — the thing space did to men — was there within him and he couldn't resist its drag. Something in space — some pressure component — ripped away all that gives man human dignity. Some tearing force in void tore everything away and left the elementals bare. Hating was a joy, a joy Connors could not resist.

Then suddenly it occurred to him. Did they miss it? No! Maybe they hadn't been sure, but they suspected. Otherwise, why the time lock on the guns? The excuse had been fear of accident. Absurd. No — they'd left the human symbol out of the equation because it had baffled them. But they'd suspected.

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The rotten murderers! Then Connors laughed.

They spent two billion dollars to build a space cage for five tigers!

Withington hated them all, but for Purdy his hatred was deepest. He'd have loved to get his hands on Purdy's throat and keep them there: *The rotten heel! To him women are things to use. What if he ever got his hands on Helen? He'd break her in two! Such men should die. Somehow I'll kill Purdy.*

Barton's hatred was democratic: *They all think they're better than I am. Them and their degrees. Me — I came up the hard way. I'm better than any of them. Before this is over I'm going to split a few skulls.*

Griffith lived in terror: *God help me. Every man on the ship plotting my death. Every one of them plotting night and day to back me into a corner. God help me. What chance have I got?*

Purdy also had no special hatred: *The sons-of-bitches. I'll get every one of them before they get me.*

Day followed day and the *Rachel II* ripped a long tunnel through black void as she arced gracefully toward the cold, dead moon. Inside her hull men walked like jungle beasts, always balanced on the balls of their feet; always ready to dodge or leap. By common consent they ate at different times so that no two men were in the commissary at once. This was not worked out in conference; but rather after the fashion animals work out the routine for visiting a water hole. Connors, the strongest, went first. Purdy followed him. Withington and Barton had a savage battle in the companionway and Barton was pulled off his victim so he went third. Griffith brought up the rear, fearful, trembling, and he spent the off-hours crying in his cabin.

They knew something decisive had to happen. It came between Barton and Purdy when the former challenged the latter's turn in the commissary. Like two bull elks they squared away and charged each other.

With the fight at its height the other three arrived ready to save the loser from death. But both men snarled on the rest.

"Keep your noses out!"

"This is to a finish!"

"The ship ain't big enough for both of us!"

Purdy charged and Barton caught him squarely in the face with a savage kick. Retching, Purdy went down, but managed to recover in time to make a stand, and the fight went on.

It turned eventually in favor of Purdy and his hands closed over Barton's throat to apply lethal pressure. Purdy was looking through a red haze and he grinned when he saw that the others were

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gone. It was a fight to the finish with no interference. He looked down at Barton's clotting face and was filled with a fierce joy.

Then Connor's voice barked over the intercom: "To your posts! We're coming in! We're coming in!"

Purdy's hands released slowly. Even more slowly he staggered to his feet and to an observation port. The bleak wastes of the moon filled the sky.

The ship settled to the ground like the queen she was. Her jets went out and she lay waiting, but no hatch opened. No man had yet set foot on the surface of the moon.

Inside there was dead silence. An hour passed. Then a door opened into the companionway and Connors stepped from the chart room. For a time he was alone. Then another door opened. Barton came out. He had recovered greatly but his face was a mass of ugly bruises.

Soon five men were standing in the companionway. Connors turned and walked into the lounge. They followed, silently.

Connors said, "Well, we made it."

Purdy said, "Yeah." He walked to the liquor cabinet and poured five drinks. They came one by one to pick them up. Purdy said, "Here's to a great skipper."

Griffith said, "You can say that again. To Connors. The best that ever lived."

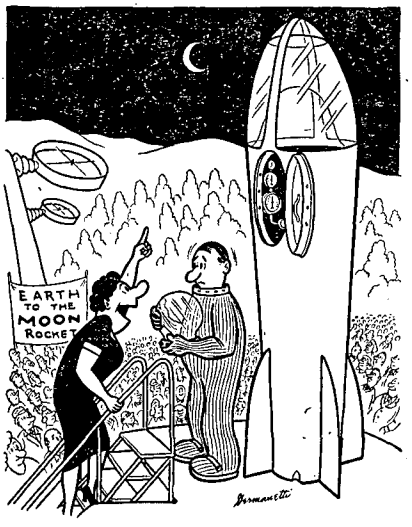
Barton put down his glass and slapped Withington on the back. "We made it!"

Withington grinned as though it had just then dawned on him. "Damned if we didn't."

Then it was as though a spring had been released. They were upon each other, mauling, laughing, wrestling like children in high glee.

It was Connors who put on the damper. He walked to an observation port and looked out — not at the surface of the moon — but up into high void where Earth hung like a great red menace.

"But how are we going to get back?" Connors asked quietly.



"Shouldn't you wait till it's full?"

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We ran into General Boak the other day. Ex-General now, of course; not that he faded away, he just up and retired. Why? It seems an inventor arrived at the Army Proving Grounds with a War Eliminator. Since it consisted of a white robe, some colored cloth and a New Year's hat, the General blew a fuse. But then he'd never heard of white magic. . . .

By the way, you know what a woman-hater he was. Well, he's married now. Children, too. . . .

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BY
RALPH ROBIN

RABBIT PUNCH

"YOU'RE four hours late," said the general. "You were supposed to come this morning."

"We took the train," said Colonel Pointers of the General Staff. "I sent you a teletype."

"I didn't get it. Anyway, why didn't you fly?"

"Dr. Lastri had a difference of opinion with some spirits of the upper air. He thought the train would be safer." Colonel Pointers' face was grave.

"Washington," General Boak said.

Colonel Pointers introduced his party. "Dr. Simon Lastri, the inventor. And this is Miss Susan

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Dean of the Historical Branch."

The general remained standing behind his desk. He did not ask them to sit.

"Why do we need anybody from the Historical Branch? Is she a lady friend of yours, Pointers?"

Susan Dean burst out: "General Boak!"

But Colonel Pointers laughed. "I'm a happily married man, general."

"That doesn't answer my first question."

"It's Senator Willoughby's idea to have a representative of the Historical Branch present. He wants an eyewitness account written in good literary style. He says that such an account, although it will be Top Secret for many years, will help document this great military innovation."

"Senators," said the general. "Representatives," he added. "Congressmen," he summed up. "Now, Dr. Lastri, if I may ask an impertinent question, just what is your invention?"

"I shall show you when the time comes," Dr. Lastri said haughtily.

The tone did not match his appearance, which was far from haughty. He was small and he stooped. His curled shirt collar was unbuttoned and his tie waggled loosely on one side. His blond mustache was longer on the left side than on the right. He had hair like Carl Sandburg's.

The general filled his well-shaved face with air. He looked ready to explode with a literal *pop*.

Colonel Pointers said quickly: "That's the way Senator Willoughby wants it, and the Department has consented. The senator witnessed a private demonstration. He insists the results were wonderful, but so bizarre we would never go ahead with it if he or Lastri told us what happened. About all the senator would say was this invention would make any enemy run like a rabbit.

"He did let out something else — that he was so shaken he didn't want to attend any more of Dr. Lastri's demonstrations. He must be acting in good faith. Another indication, he's been driving us crazy pushing this thing while at the same time he seems to bear Dr. Lastri a strong personal grudge."

Simon Lastri smiled but didn't say anything.

"If there's any chance of injury to personnel," the general said, "I would think, Pointers, you would have had better sense than to bring a woman along. I assign you the job of coping with her if she gets hysterical."

"General Boak," Susan Dean said slowly, "I don't get hysterical. I don't faint. I don't scream. I don't cry. Also, Colonel Pointers didn't bring me along except in the sense that we traveled together.

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The Historical Branch were told to send a representative and they sent me. Why don't you like women?"

"I like life to be orderly," said the general.

"It is my understanding that injury to personnel is improbable," Colonel Pointers said cautiously.

"My method of warfare, besides being the most effective in history, is the most humane," Simon Lastri said.

General Boak slapped both hands on his desk. "Let's get it over with. What equipment does he need, Pointers? What personnel?"

Simon Lastri answered for himself. "I have all the equipment I need in this bag." He pointed to a large grocery bag at his feet. "As for personnel, as you gentlemen call people, those present will be sufficient."

"That suits me," said General Boak. "I won't waste even a driver's time. I'll take you out to the range in my jeep. Field F has been out of use all day," he said reproachfully to Colonel Pointers.

He pressed down the lever on the intercom and told someone where he was going.

"Yes, sir!" said the intercom. The lever snapped up in salute.

General Boak tapped one foot while Susan took a scarf from her purse and tied her hair.

Illustrator: Tom Beecham

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The general drove past machine shops and laboratory buildings and pilot plants. At two posts sentries saluted. He drove through a patch of woods. There was a gate where the concrete road became dirt. Another sentry saluted, and opened the gate.

They rode a little while through meadow. "Isn't it lovely?" Susan exclaimed. "All those buttercups and Indian paintbrushes."

"Those are hawkweed," the general said.

"Technically, the general is right," said Dr. Lastri. "Indian paintbrush belongs to a different family."

"We called them Indian paintbrushes when we were children. 'Hawkweed' is such an ugly name. I think the general only calls them that because he has to blow them up in his tests."

"I assure you, Miss Dean, the thought never occurred to me." General Boak brought the jeep almost to a stop. "Is this place all right, Lastri?"

"It is satisfactory, General."

They climbed out. Colonel Pointers offered Susan his hand. Dr. Lastri, hugging his paper bag, almost fell.

There was a light breeze. Susan stood — perhaps a bit self-consciously — with her face to the wind. She untied the scarf from her head. Her brown hair lifted gently from her neck. Her dress pressed gently against her body.

The three men looked at her. Dr. Lastri dispassionately, his left mustache drooping. General Boak grimly. Colonel Pointers smiled at her and said, "At the risk of making our reputation worse with General Boak, I'd say you are a very pretty young woman, Miss Dean."

"Your moral reputation is safe with me, Pointers. I have judged you. You are a good family man with three undisciplined children underfoot."

"Four, sir," the colonel said cheerfully.

The general shuddered.

"Why, General Boak, you dislike children as much as you do women," Susan said.

"More," General Boak said. "But, Miss Dean, we are not here to discuss my opinions and Colonel Pointers' aberrations. Nor are we here to pose for illustrated calendars. Lastri, proceed with the demonstration."

"Very well."

Simon Lastri knelt on the grass and dug into his paper bag. He pulled out a small board with crayon markings, a white robe of thin stuff, and a triangular hat that looked as if it were left over from New Year's Eve. He turned the bag upside down and shook it. A tinny medal on a cord and a few swatches of cloth dropped out. He smoothed and folded the empty bag.

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"Where's the invention, man? What is that stuff?"

"My equipment."

"It looks like magical equipment," Susan said.

"It is. You may as well know now that I don't have an invention, strictly speaking. My method of warfare strikes at the enemy with magic. White magic, since it is on our side."

The general puffed his cheeks and let go.

"Pointers! I've stood for a lot of Washington's damnfoolishness in my time, but this is going too far. I should have resigned my commission before I lived to see the day that a full colonel would come down from General Staff with a sorcerer and a woman to make a fool of me. Are you drunk? Do you smoke opium? Are you insane? You've signed in at this post and you're under my control for disciplinary purposes."

The general looked at his watch.

"It's three o'clock now. By four o'clock you'll either be confined to quarters awaiting court-martial or in the psychiatric ward of the station hospital. Or both!"

"He would need my help for that," Dr. Lastri said calmly. He busied himself poking at the grassroots with the board, which had a pointed end.

Colonel Pointers spoke softly: "The situation, General, in my opinion, calls for a detached point of view. I had no idea the proposal was so . . . uh . . . visionary, though perhaps I should have guessed from Dr. Lastri's difficulties with the spirits of the upper air. But it wouldn't have made any difference. I'm only the messenger boy in this business. The whole thing was arranged between Senator Willoughby and the highest echelons.

"It's an old story. Senators have always made life miserable for generals with their meddling. It goes back to ancient Rome. Those old conscript fathers, as they call them in the Latin books, were always trying to run wars they didn't know anything about. Just like now."

"That's very true." General Boak sighed meditatively. "Look how they treated Scipio Africanus."

Colonel Pointers had a reputation in his Office for his ability to handle generals.

"Nevertheless, Pointers, I am going to write a memorandum that will blister Washington's hide."

"If it crosses my desk, sir, I will concur," said Colonel Pointers.

"Why don't you men watch him? It's very interesting." Susan had some three-by-five filing cards in her hand and was taking notes. "He's making the magic circle now."

Simon Lastri was scratching

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a circle about ten feet in diameter. At intervals he placed the swatches of cloth on the torn earth and roots. They were embroidered, and he placed them so that the embroidered figure was uppermost. The figure, the same on each, was a five-pointed star.

"Pentagrams," Susan said. "One of the oldest of magical symbols. They're marked on that stick he's digging with, too." She made a note. "Does all this really have to be classified Secret? I'd like to write a paper on the survival of ceremonial magic for one of the historical or anthropological journals. I might even make it the subject of my Master's thesis."

"Young lady," said the general, "when Washington wakes up, they'll classify this idiocy so high that nobody except the enemy will ever hear about it. And I want to see those notes before you leave this post."

"Don't worry, General. I'll make it clear that you were against magic. I'll say that you balked like an old mule."

The general flushed. "Women," he said. "No discipline."

"Dr. Lastri," Colonel Pointers said at this moment, "where shall we stand for the demonstration?"

"Anywhere. That is, outside the circle."

Simon Lastri pulled a towel-sized napkin from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his face and hands. "I always take napkins on trains," he explained. "Railroads charge too much for their meals."

He put on the robe, dropped the medal around his neck, and set the funny hat on his head. The medal was another pentagram, stamped from some white metal.

He walked to the center of the magic circle carrying the pointed board.

"Is that all you're going to use?" Susan asked. "I thought you needed a lot more things than that. Altars and braziers and incense and black roosters and white goats and so on."

"Excrescence," Dr. Lastri said scornfully. "The affectations of charlatans. I use only what is essential. I shall now begin the demonstration."

He bowed in four directions.

"The cardinal points of the compass," Susan said.

Simon Lastri raised the board above his head, aiming it at some particular spot in the heavens. He started to chant.

The words were in a language that none of the listeners knew or in a pseudo-language. The voice was without resonance, rather hoarse.

Colonel Pointers turned to the general and smiled. "It reminds me of a newsboy who used to yell in an unhappy monotone right under my window when I was stationed in London. I never could make out what he was saying."

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"It's not a comical thing, Pointers. An episode like this fills me with misgivings for the future of the Republic."

"Whither are we going?" Colonel Pointers asked solemnly.

"The very question I ask myself. I have a strong sense of history, Pointers. I fear we are entering into a period of decline. We are at the turning point when a once-virile people loses faith in the valor and sagacity of its generals. Then comes superstition, the grasping at straws. The soldier and the statesman are pushed aside by the court astrologer. This is a tragic day, Pointers. What historian, what future Gibbon, will delineate it for the generations?"

"Me," said Susan. "That's what I'm here for. I have a civil service rating of Historian, GS-11."

"God of Battles!" cried the general. "And yet," he said, "perhaps this foolish and impudent girl is the fitting historian of a degenerate age."

There was an odd look on Susan's face: not a look of resentment. "What's happening to Dr. Lastri's voice?"

"It sounds the same to me, Miss Dean," said Colonel Pointers. "The same frog in his throat."

"You are not an accurate observer, Pointers. I must admit that Miss Dean is right. His voice is becoming . . . insistent? . . . it's hard to describe. But I don't like it. Lastri, be quiet while I review the situation."

"Is it possible that he has a psychological weapon?" Colonel Pointers asked.

General Boak did not answer. He glared at Simon Lastri, who was still chanting. "Lastri, I've given you an order. Stop it, or I'll choke you silent."

Colonel Pointers was suddenly busy with Susan Dean. She was moaning and her face was white. Her legs were trembling.

She forced through her lips: "Colonel, he's doing something to my insides. The voice is doing it. Something dreadful . . ."

Then General Boak rushed at Simon Lastri. The general fell, perhaps he tripped, and he sprawled with his hands just touching the magic circle.

"Pointers, take over," he cried, and seemed to faint.

Susan was unconscious now, and Colonel Pointers lowered her to the grass.

"Dr. Lastri," he shouted above the rasping gibberish, "if you've hypnotized these people, bring them around right now. You should have warned us about this effect."

Simon Lastri stopped making noise. The meadow was quiet and bright. Dr. Lastri took off his hat and loosened his robe. "It can't be reversed now. But what are you doing on your feet?"

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"What do you mean?"

"It should have worked on you too."

"I'm certainly sorry. Now, Dr. Lastri — good heavens!"

General Boak twisted in a spasm. Then his body began to shrink within his uniform. His hands disappeared into his sleeves. His feet shot up his trouser legs. His head vanished into his collar.

The general, or what was left of him, was a wriggling bundle of tropical worsted.

"Of course," said Simon Lastri. "No wonder it didn't work on you." He touched one of the insignia on Colonel Pointers' lapels. "You are wearing pentagrams."

It was the insigne of the General Staff Corps. The eagle, the shield, and the glory over a five-pointed silver star.

"I knew about the pentagrams that the general wears to show he's a general and I neutralized them, but I didn't even notice yours."

Colonel Pointers wasn't listening. He looked from General Boak to Susan Dean. Her clothes were empty except for a squirming bulge in her blue summer dress. The dress leaped in the air, opened, and a young female rabbit emerged and twitched its nostrils at Colonel Pointers.

It started to walk toward him. Its hind foot was caught, and it had to kick away a pair of nylon panties.

A larger rabbit, a male, worked its way out of General Boak's uniform.

"They make handsomer hares than Senator Willoughby," Dr. Lastri said. He was a purist. The animals were cottontails and therefore, technically, hares.

"You cannot fail to note, Colonel Pointers, the advantages of my method of warfare. The ritual, by the way, is effective over radio and public-address systems if it originates in a magic circle. . . ."

General Boak leaped. When he hit the ground, Susan's long ears stiffened and she looked over her furry shoulder. She bounded up and away. General Boak, wildly leaping, followed her. Two white tails bounced up and down across the meadow. The distance between them was decreasing as they passed from sight.

"You know, that is very touching," Simon Lastri said. "The shock of the transformation has softened General Boak's heart. The endocrines of a male hare may have helped, too. I was talking about broadcasting the ritual. By use of sound trucks or stationary amplifiers, depending on the tactical situation, whole units of the enemy's forces can be transformed into hares. . . ."

"This is too big for me, Dr. Lastri. I'm going to take you back to Washington and turn you over to the Army Chief of Staff himself. But the immediate problem

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is General Boak and Miss Dean. Please change them back immediately. Hurry!"

As General Boak had said, Colonel Pointers was a good family man.

"There's nothing I can do now. It's a time- mechanism, so to speak, that must be set in advance for a given period of transformation. In this test, the subjects will resume human form in about another ten minutes."

"Ten minutes! I'm afraid that's too long."

"You mean long enough," said Simon Lastri.

Colonel Pointers looked at the two tangles of empty clothes. He took the magician by the arm. "Let's go for a walk till they get back and collect themselves. They'll be embarrassed enough in any case."

But Susan was calm, and General Boak was as dignified as a general can be with one shoe off. He had been stung on the sole of his foot by a bee.

Colonel Pointers drove the jeep back to headquarters while the general sat stonily beside him. From the back seat, Simon Lastri expounded the magical method of warfare.

In his office, the general stood behind his desk on one foot. He spoke coldly: "While I cannot deny that the invention is operative, I will nevertheless oppose its adoption by the Army. It is cowardly, dishonorable, and inhumane, and altogether unworthy of a man of arms."

"You will be overruled," Dr. Lastri said.

"Your view, sir, will be given every consideration by Staff," Colonel Pointers said.

General Boak ground his teeth.

"Is that bee sting hurting you? Is there any place I can get some soda to put on it?" Susan asked.

The general clicked the intercom. "Send a car to take a party to the railroad station. Right away." He looked over the heads of the visitors. "You can all wait in the hall," he said stiffly.

It wasn't until they were half way to Washington that Susan said to Colonel Pointers: "General Boak talks so much about hating women. Did he by any chance ever marry?"

"He is a bachelor, my dear." The good family man patted her hand.

The next day a period of intense work began for Colonel Pointers. The Chief of Staff ordered him to start developing the strategic and tactical consequences of Simon Lastri's method, or rabbitization, as it was called in the classified documents. A few weeks later Colonel Pointers was given top command of all work on rabbitization, and a secret fund of $100,000,000 was allocated. He was promoted to brigadier general.

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Despite the most rigid security regulations, the Navy got wind of the project and rapidly devised a ritual for turning enemy sailors into seals. The Air Force developed its own pigeonization. In November, under pressure from the Secretary of Defense, the services pooled their researches in a Board of Transformation Warfare. Pointers found himself presiding officer of the Board — and a major general.

Senator Willoughby took a lively interest in transformation warfare and called on General Pointers several times a week to give him suggestions on strategic doctrine. General Pointers would listen gravely and take careful notes. He often told the senator: "You're like one of those conscript fathers in ancient Rome. As much at home on the battlefield as in the Senate."

What with all the work and Senator Willoughby, Pointers stopped thinking about General Boak and Susan Dean, except as former TP's (transformed persons). He had talked briefly with Susan on the telephone when she resigned after finishing her report, and he had attended the testimonial dinner when General Boak retired.

A February rain was dripping down the windows of the Pentagon one morning as Pointers glanced at the *Washington Post* before digging into the day's reports on simulated battle rabbitization. He saw a picture of General Boak and Susan Dean on the front page.

In one of its frivolous moods, the *Post* had headed the story: RETIRED GENERAL HITS JACKPOT.

The story began:

> "Beating statistical odds estimated at 600,000 to one, Mrs. Susan Dean Boak, wife of General Fremont T. Boak, late last night gave birth to quadruplets, all boys. . . ."

General Boak, the *Post* reported, declined to comment for publication.

FROM the October 1850 issue of *Scientific American:* "On Saturday afternoon before last, Joshua Pusey ascended with a balloon from Reading, Pennsylvania. When at an altitude of two miles, he was overtaken in a snowstorm, and, what was strange to him, and will be so to everybody, was the fact that the snowflakes ascended."

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the CELESTIAL OMNIBUS

BY E. M. FORSTER

A Classic Reprint

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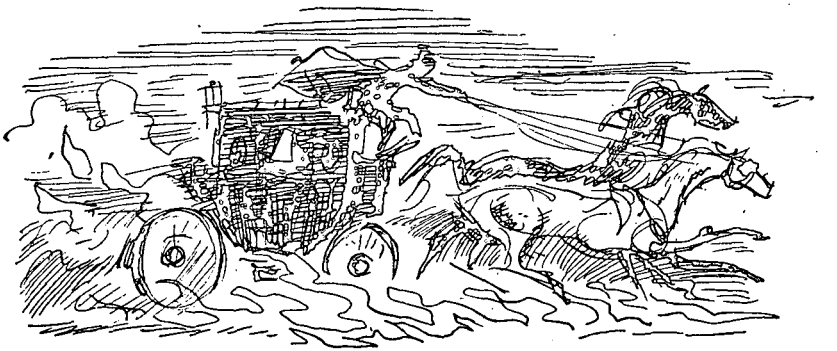

BY E. M. FORSTER

THE CELESTIAL OMNIBUS

In case you think only the dead can get to Heaven, here's big news! In a London suburb is a dead-end alley where twice a day a horse-drawn omnibus leaves for the Promised Land. Just make sure you get a return ticket before the bus pulls out; otherwise, brother, you don't get back! Oh yes — one thing more: don't mistake reality for the truth. An error like that can make your return to Earth sudden and final. Don't say we didn't warn you!

Edward Morgan Forster has published two collections of short stories, but is best known as a novelist. His five novels include Howard's End *and that notable study of the problems of empire,* A Passage to India.

THE boy who resided at Agathox Lodge, 28, Buckingham Park Road, Surbiton, had often been puzzled by the old signpost that stood almost opposite. He asked his mother about it, and she replied that it was a joke, and not a very nice one, which had been made many years back by some naughty young men, and that the police ought to remove it. For there were two strange things about this signpost: firstly, it pointed up a blank alley, and, secondly, it had painted on it, in faded characters, the words, "To Heaven".

"What kind of young men were they?" he asked.

"I think your father told me

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that one of them wrote verses, and was expelled from the University, and came to grief in other ways. Still, it was a long time ago. You must ask your father about it. He will say the same as I do, that it was put up as a joke."

"So it doesn't mean anything at all?"

She sent him upstairs to put on his best things, for the Bonses were coming to tea, and he was to hand the cake-stand.

It struck him, as he wrenched on his tightening trousers, that he might do worse than ask Mr. Bons about the signpost. His father, though very kind, always laughed at him — shrieked with laughter whenever he or any other child asked a question or spoke. But Mr. Bons was serious as well as kind. He had a beautiful house and lent one books, he was a churchwarden, and a candidate for the County Council; he had donated to the Free Library enormously, he presided over the Literary Society, and had Members of Parliament to stop with him — in short, he was probably the wisest person alive.

Yet even Mr. Bons could only say that the signpost was a joke — the joke of a person named Shelley.

"Of course!" cried the mother. "I told you so, dear. That was the name."

"Had you never heard of Shelley?" asked Mr. Bons.

"No," said the boy, and hung his head.

"But is there no Shelley in the house?"

"Why, yes!" exclaimed the lady, in much agitation. "Dear Mr. Bons, we aren't such Philistines as that. Two at the least. One a wedding present, and the other, smaller print, in one of the spare rooms."

"I believe we have seven Shelleys," said Mr. Bons, with a slow smile. Then he brushed the cake crumbs off his stomach, and, together with his daughter, rose to go.

The boy, obeying a wink from his mother, saw them all the way to the garden gate, and when they had gone he did not at once return to the house, but gazed for a little up and down Buckingham Park Road.

His parents lived at the right end of it. After No. 39 the quality of the houses dropped very suddenly, and 64 had not even a separate servants' entrance. But at the present moment the whole road looked rather pretty, for the sun had just set in splendour, and the inequalities of rent were drowned in a saffron afterglow. Small birds twittered, and the breadwinners' train shrieked musically down through the cutting — that wonderful cutting which has drawn to itself the whole beauty out of Surbiton, and clad

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itself, like any Alpine valley, with the glory of the fir and the silver birch and the primrose. It was this cutting that had first stirred desires within the boy — desires for something just a little different, he knew not what, desires that would return whenever things were sunlit, as they were this evening, running up and down inside him, up and down, up and down, till he would feel quite unusual all over, and as likely as not would want to cry. This evening he was even sillier, for he slipped across the road towards the signposts and began to run up the blank alley.

The alley runs between high walls — the walls of the gardens of "Ivanhoe" and "Bella Vista" respectively. It smells a little all the way, and is scarcely twenty yards long, including the turn at the end. So not unnaturally the boy soon came to a standstill. "I'd like to kick that Shelley," he exclaimed, and glanced idly at a piece of paper which was pasted on the wall. Rather an odd piece of paper, and he read it carefully before he turned back. This is what he read:

S. AND C. R. C. C.

Alteration in Service

Owing to lack of patronage the Company are regretfully compelled to suspend the hourly service, and to retain only the *Sunrise and Sunset Omnibuses*, which will run as usual. It is to be hoped that the public will patronize an arrangement which is intended for their convenience. As an extra inducement, the Company will, for the first time, now issue

Return Tickets!

(*available one day only*) *which may be obtained of the driver. Passengers are again reminded that no tickets are issued at the other end, and that no complaints in this connection will receive consideration from the Company. Nor will the Company be responsible for any negligence or stupidity on the part of Passengers, nor for Hailstorms, Lightning, Loss of Tickets, nor for any Act of God.*

For the Direction.

Now, he had never seen this notice before, nor could he imagine where the omnibus went to. S. of course was for Surbiton, and R. C. C. meant Road Car Company. But what was the meaning of the other C.? Coombe and Malden, perhaps, or possibly "City". Yet it could not hope to compete with the South-Western. The whole thing, the boy reflected, was run on hopelessly unbusinesslike lines. Why not tickets from the other end? And what an hour to start! Then he realized that unless the notice was a hoax, an omnibus must have been starting just as he was wishing the Bonses goodbye. He peered at the ground through the gathering dusk, and there he saw what might or might

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not be the marks of wheels. Yet nothing had come out of the alley. And he had never seen an omnibus at any time in the Buckingham Park Road. No: it must be a hoax, like the signposts, like the fairy tales, like the dreams upon which he would wake suddenly in the night. And with a sigh he stepped from the alley — right into the arms of his father.

Oh, how his father laughed! "Poor, poor Popsey!" he cried. "Diddums! Diddums! Diddums think he'd walky-palky up to Evvink!" And his mother, also convulsed with laughter, appeared on the steps of Agathox Lodge. "Don't, Bob!" she gasped. "Don't be so naughty! Oh, you'll kill me! Oh, leave the boy alone!"

But all that evening the joke was kept up. The father implored to be taken too. Was it a very tiring walk? Need one wipe one's shoes on the doormat? And the boy went to bed feeling faint and sore, and thankful for only one thing — that he had not said a word about the omnibus. It was a hoax, yet through his dreams it grew more and more real, and the streets of Surbiton, through which he saw it driving, seemed instead to become hoaxes and shadows. And very early in the morning he woke with a cry, for he had had a glimpse of its destination.

He struck a match, and its light fell not only on his watch but also on his calendar, so that he knew it to be half an hour to sunrise. It was pitch dark, for the fog had come down from London in the night, and all Surbiton was wrapped in its embrace. Yet he sprang out and dressed himself, for he was determined to settle once for all which was real: the omnibus or the streets. "I shall be a fool one way or the other," he thought, "until I know." Soon he was shivering in the road under the gas lamp that guarded the entrance to the alley.

To enter the alley itself required some courage. Not only was it horribly dark, but he now realized that it was an impossible terminus for an omnibus. If it had not been for a policeman, whom he heard approaching through the fog, he would never have made the attempt. The next moment he had made the attempt and failed. Nothing. Nothing but a blank alley and a very silly boy gaping at its dirty floor. It was a hoax. "I'll tell papa and mamma," he decided. "I deserve it. I deserve that they should know. I am too silly to be alive." And he went back to the gate of Agathox Lodge.

There he remembered that his watch was fast. The sun was not risen; it would not rise for two minutes. "Give the bus every chance," he thought cynically, and returned into the alley.

But the omnibus was there.

It had two horses, whose sides

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were still smoking from their journey, and its two great lamps shone through the fog against the alley's walls, changing their cobwebs and moss into tissues of fairyland. The driver was huddled up in a cape. He faced the blank wall, and how he had managed to drive in so neatly and so silently was one of the many things that the boy never discovered. Nor could he imagine how ever he would drive out.

"Please," his voice quavered through the foul brown air. "Please, is that an omnibus?"

"Omnibus est," said the driver, without turning round. There was a moment's silence. The policeman passed, coughing, by the entrance to the alley. The boy crouched in the shadow, for he did not want to be found out. He was pretty sure, too, that it was a Pirate; nothing else, he reasoned, would go from such odd places and at such odd hours.

"About when do you start?" He tried to sound nonchalant.

"At sunrise."

"How far do you go?"

"The whole way."

"And can I have a return ticket which will bring me all the way back?"

"You can."

"Do you know, I half think I'll come." The driver made no answer. The sun must have risen, for he unhitched the brake. And scarcely had the boy jumped in before the omnibus was off.

How? Did it turn? There was no room. Did it go forward? There was a blank wall. Yet it was moving — moving at a stately pace through the fog, which had turned from brown to yellow. The thought of warm bed and warmer breakfast made the boy feel faint. He wished he had not come. His parents would not have approved. He would have gone back to them if the weather had not made it impossible. The solitude was terrible; he was the only passenger. And the omnibus, though well-built, was cold and somewhat musty. He drew his coat around him, and in so doing chanced to feel his pocket. It was empty. He had forgotten his purse.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Stop!" And then, being of a polite disposition, he glanced up at the painted notice-board so that he might call the driver by name. "Mr. Browne! stop; oh, do please stop!"

Mr. Browne did not stop, but he opened a little window and looked in at the boy. His face was a surprise, so kind it was and modest.

"Mr. Browne, I've left my purse behind. I've not got a penny. I can't pay for the ticket. Will you take my watch, please? I am in the most awful hole."

"Tickets on this line," said the driver, "whether single or return,

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can be purchased by coinage from no terrene mint. And a chronometer, though it had solaced the vigils of Charlemagne, or measured the slumbers of Laura, can acquire by no mutation the double-cake that charms the fangless Cerberus of Heaven!" So saying, he handed in the necessary ticket, and while the boy said "Thank you," continued: "Titular pretensions, I know it well, are vanity. Yet they merit no censure when uttered on a laughing lip, and in an homonymous world are in some sort useful, since they do serve to distinguish one Jack from his fellow. Remember me, therefore, as Sir Thomas Browne."

"Are you a Sir? Oh, sorry!" He had heard of these gentlemen drivers. "It *is* good of you about the ticket. But if you go on at this rate, however does your bus pay?"

"It does not pay. It was not intended to pay. Many are the faults of my equipage; it is compounded too curiously of foreign woods; its cushions tickle erudition rather than promote repose; and my horses are nourished not on the evergreen pastures of the moment, but on the dried bents and clovers of Latinity. But that it pays! — that error at all events was never intended and never attained."

"Sorry again," said the boy rather hopelessly. Sir Thomas looked sad, fearing that, even for a moment, he had been the cause of sadness. He invited the boy to come up and sit beside him on the box, and together they journeyed on through the fog, which was now changing from yellow to white. There were no houses by the road; so it must be either Putney Heath or Wimbledon Common.

"Have you been a driver always?"

"I was a physician once."

"But why did you stop? Weren't you good?"

"As a healer of bodies I had scant success, and several score of my patients preceded me. But as a healer of the spirit I have succeeded beyond my hopes and my deserts. For though my draughts were not better nor subtler than those of other men, yet, by reason of the cunning goblets wherein I offered them, the queasy soul was ofttimes tempted to sip and be refreshed."

"The queasy soul," he murmured; "if the sun sets with trees in front of it, and you suddenly come strange all over, is that a queasy soul?"

"Have you felt that?"

"Why, yes."

After a pause he told the boy a little, a very little, about the journey's end. But they did not chatter much, for the boy, when he liked a person, would as soon sit silent in his company as speak, and this, he discovered, was also

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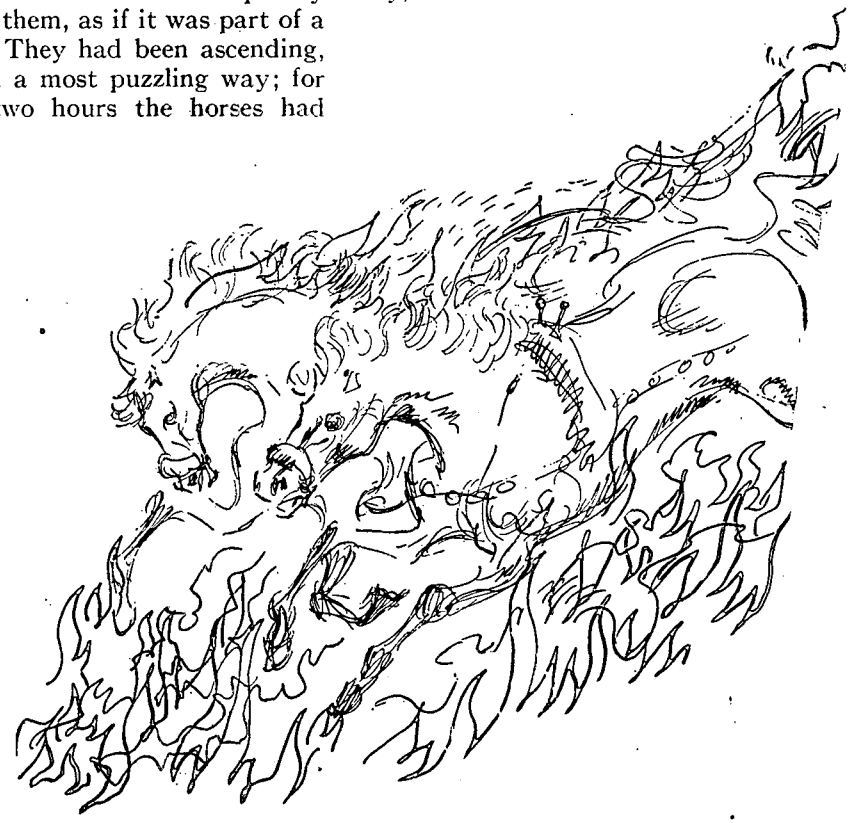
the mind of Sir Thomas Browne and of many others with whom he was to be acquainted. He heard, however, about the young man Shelley, who was now quite a famous person, with a carriage of his own, and about some of the other drivers who are in the service of the Company. Meanwhile the light grew stronger, though the fog did not disperse. It was now more like mist than fog, and at times would travel quickly across them, as if it was part of a cloud. They had been ascending, too, in a most puzzling way; for over two hours the horses had been pulling against the collar, and even if it were Richmond Hill they ought to have been at the top long ago. Perhaps it was Epsom, or even the North Downs; yet the air seemed keener than that which blows on either. And as to the name of their destination, Sir Thomas Browne was silent.

Crash!

"Thunder, by jove!" said the boy, "and not so far off either.



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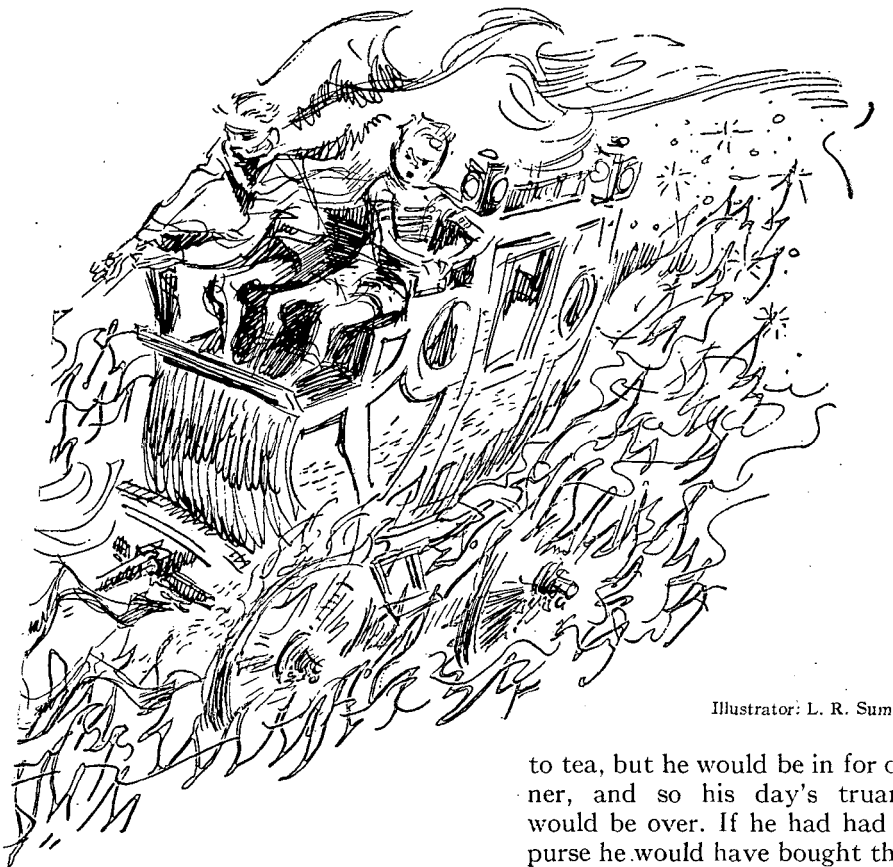

Illustrator: L. R. Summers

Listen to the echoes! It's more like mountains."

He thought, not very vividly, of his father and mother. He saw them sitting down to sausages and listening to the storm. He saw his own empty place. Then there would be questions, alarms, theories, jokes, consolations. They would expect him back at lunch. To lunch he would not come, nor to tea, but he would be in for dinner, and so his day's truancy would be over. If he had had his purse he would have bought them presents — not that he should have known what to get them.

Crash!

The peal and the lightning came together. The cloud quivered as if it were alive, and torn streamers of mist rushed past. "Are you afraid?" asked Sir Thomas Browne.

"What is there to be afraid of? Is it much farther?"

The horses of the omnibus

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stopped just as the ball of fire burst up and exploded with a ringing noise that was deafening but clear, like the noise of a blacksmith's forge. All the cloud was shattered.

"Oh, listen, Sir Thomas Browne! No, I mean look; we shall get a view at last. No, I mean listen; that sounds like a rainbow!"

The noise had died into the faintest murmur, beneath which another murmur grew, spreading stealthily, steadily, in a curve that widened but did not vary. And in widening curves a rainbow was spreading from the horses' feet into the dissolving mists.

"But how beautiful! What colours! Where will it stop? It is more like the rainbows you can tread on. More like dreams."

The colour and the sound grew together. The rainbow spanned an enormous gulf. Clouds rushed under it and were pierced by it, and still it grew, reaching forward, conquering the darkness, until it touched something that seemed more solid than a cloud.

The boy stood up. "What is that out there?" he called. "What does it rest on, out at that other end?"

In the morning sunshine a precipice shone forth beyond the gulf. A precipice — or was it a castle? The horses moved. They set their feet upon the rainbow.

"Oh, look!" the boy shouted. "Oh, listen! Those caves — or are they gateways? Oh, look between those cliffs at those ledges. I see people! I see trees!"

"Look also below," whispered Sir Thomas. "Neglect not the diviner Acheron."

The boy looked below, past the flames of the rainbow that licked against their wheels. The gulf also had cleared, and in its depths there flowed an everlasting river. One sunbeam entered and struck a green pool, and as they passed over he saw three maidens rise to the surface of the pool, singing, and playing with something that glistened like a ring.

"You down in the water —" he called.

They answered, "You up on the bridge —" There was a burst of music. "You up on the bridge, good luck to you. Truth in the depth, truth on the height."

"You down in the water, what are you doing?"

Sir Thomas Browne replied: "They sport in the mancipiary possession of their gold"; and the omnibus arrived.

The boy was in disgrace. He sat locked up in the nursery of Agathox Lodge, learning poetry for a punishment. His father had said, "My boy! I can pardon anything but untruthfulness," and had caned him, saying at each stroke, "There is *no* omnibus, *no* driver, *no* bridge, *no* mountain; you are a

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truant, a *guttersnipe*, a *liar*." His father could be very stern at times. His mother had begged him to say he was sorry. But he could not say that. It was the greatest day of his life, in spite of the caning and the poetry at the end of it.

He had returned punctually at sunset — driven not by Sir Thomas Browne, but by a maiden lady who was full of quiet fun. They had talked of omnibuses and also of barouche landaus. How far away her gentle voice seemed now! Yet it was scarcely three hours since he had left her up the alley.

His mother called through the door. "Dear, you are to come down and to bring your poetry with you."

He came down, and found that Mr. Bons was in the smoking-room with his father. It had been a dinner party.

"Here is the great traveller!" said his father grimly. "Here is the young gentleman who drives in an omnibus over rainbows, while young ladies sing to him." Pleased with his wit, he laughed.

"After all," said Mr. Bons, smiling, "there is something a little like it in Wagner. It is odd how, in quite illiterate minds, you will find glimmers of Artistic Truth. The case interests me. Let me plead for the culprit. We have all romanced in our time, haven't we?"

"Hear how kind Mr. Bons is," said his mother, while his father said, "Very well. Let him say his poem, and that will do. He is going away to my sister on Tuesday, and *she* will cure him of this alley-slopering." (Laughter.) "Say your poem."

The boy began. "'Standing aloof in giant ignorance.'"

His father laughed again — roared. "One for you, my son! 'Standing aloof in giant ignorance!' I never knew these poets talked sense. Just describes you. Here, Bons, you go in for poetry. Put him through it, will you, while I fetch up the whisky?"

"Yes, give me the Keats," said Mr. Bons. "Let him say his Keats to me."

So for a few moments the wise man and the ignorant boy were left alone in the smoking-room.

"'Standing aloof in giant ignorance, of thee I dream and of the Cyclades, as one who sits ashore and longs perchance to visit —'"

"Quite right. To visit what?"

"'To visit dolphin coral in deep seas,'" said the boy, and burst into tears.

"Come, come! why do you cry?"

"Because — because all these words that only rhymed before — now that I've come back they're me."

Mr. Bons laid the Keats down. The case was more interesting than he had expected. "*You?*" he exclaimed. "This sonnet, *you?*"

"Yes — and look further on:

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'Aye, on the shores of darkness there is light, and precipices show untrodden green.' It *is* so, sir. All these things are true."

"I never doubted it," said Mr. Bons, with closed eyes.

"You — then you believe me? You believe in the omnibus and the driver and the storm and that return ticket I got for nothing and —"

"Tut, tut! No more of your yarns, my boy. I meant that I never doubted the essential truth of poetry. Some day, when you have read more, you will understand what I mean."

"But Mr. Bons, it *is* so. There *is* light upon the shores of darkness. I have seen it coming. Light and a wind."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Bons.

"If I had stopped! They tempted me. They told me to give up my ticket — for you cannot come back if you lose your ticket. They called from the river for it, and indeed I was tempted, for I have never been so happy as among those precipices. But I thought of my mother and father, and that I must fetch them. Yet they will not come, though the road starts opposite our house. It has all happened as the people up there warned me, and Mr. Bons has disbelieved me like every one else. I have been caned. I shall never see that mountain again."

"What's that about me?" said Mr. Bons.

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"I told them about you, and how clever you were, and how many books you had, and they said, 'Mr. Bons will certainly disbelieve you.'"

"Stuff and nonsense, my young friend. You grow impertinent. I — well — I will settle the matter. Not a word to your father. I will cure you. To-morrow evening I will myself call here to take you for a walk, and at sunset we will go up this alley opposite and hunt for your omnibus, you silly little boy."

His face grew serious, for the boy was not disconcerted, but leapt about the room singing. "Joy! joy! I told them you would believe me. We will drive together over the rainbow. I told them that you would come." After all, could there be anything in the story? Wagner? Keats? Shelley? Sir Thomas Browne? Certainly the case was interesting.

And on the morrow evening, though it was pouring with rain, Mr. Bons did not omit to call at Agathox Lodge.

The boy was ready, bubbling with excitement, and skipping about in a way that rather vexed the President of the Literary Society. They took a turn down Buckingham Park Road, and then — having seen that no one was watching them — slipped up the alley. Naturally enough (for the sun was setting) they ran straight against the omnibus.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Bons. "Good gracious heavens!"

It was not the omnibus in which the boy had driven first, nor yet that in which he had returned. There were three horses — black, gray, and white, the gray being the finest. The driver, who turned round at the mention of goodness and of heaven, was a sallow man with terrifying jaws and sunken eyes. Mr. Bons, on seeing him, gave a cry as if of recognition, and began to tremble violently.

The boy jumped in.

"Is it possible?" cried Mr. Bons. "Is the impossible possible?"

"Sir; come in, sir. It is such a fine omnibus. Oh, here is his name — Dan someone."

Mr. Bons sprang in too. A blast of wind immediately slammed the omnibus door, and the shock jerked down all the omnibus blinds, which were very weak on their springs.

"Dan . . . Show me. Good gracious heavens! we're moving."

"Hooray!" said the boy.

Mr. Bons became flustered. He had not intended to be kidnapped. He could not find the door handle, nor push up the blinds. The omnibus was quite dark, and by the time he had struck a match, night had come on outside also. They were moving rapidly.

"A strange, a memorable adventure," he said, surveying the interior of the omnibus, which was

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large, roomy, and constructed with extreme regularity, every part exactly answering to every other part. Over the door (the handle of which was outside) was written, *Lasciate ogni baldanza voi che entrate* — at least, that was what was written, but Mr. Bons said that it was Lashy arty something, and that *baldanza* was a mistake for *speranza*. His voice sounded as if he was in church. Meanwhile, the boy called to the cadaverous driver for two return tickets. They were handed in without a word. Mr. Bons covered his face with his hand and again trembled. "Do you know what this is!" he whispered, when the little window had shut upon them. "It is the impossible."

"Well, I don't like him as much as Sir Thomas Browne, though I shouldn't be surprised if he had even more in him."

"More in him?" He stamped irritably. "By accident you have made the greatest discovery of the century, and all you can say is that there is more in this man. Do you remember those vellum books in my library, stamped with red lilies? This — sit still, I bring you stupendous news! — *this is the man who wrote them.*"

The boy sat quite still. "I wonder if we shall see Mrs. Gamp?" he asked, after a civil pause.

"Mrs. —?"

"Mrs. Gamp and Mrs. Harris. I like Mrs. Harris. I came upon them quite suddenly. Mrs. Gamp's bandboxes have moved over the rainbow so badly. All the bottoms have fallen out, and two of the pippins off her bedstead tumbled into the stream."

"Out there sits the man who wrote my vellum books!" thundered Mr. Bons, "and you talk to me of Dickens and of Mrs. Gamp?"

"I know Mrs. Gamp so well," he apologized. "I could not help being glad to see her. I recognized her voice. She was telling Mrs. Harris about Mrs. Prig."

"Did you spend the whole day in her elevating company?"

"Oh, no. I raced. I met a man who took me out beyond to a racecourse. You run, and there are dolphins out at sea."

"In-deed. Do you remember the man's name?"

"Achilles. No; he was later. Tom Jones."

Mr. Bons sighed heavily. "Well, my lad, you have made a miserable mess of it. Think of a cultured person with your opportunities! A cultured person would have known all these characters and known what to have said to each. He would not have wasted his time with a Mrs. Gamp or a Tom Jones. The creations of Homer, of Shakespeare, and of Him, who drives us now, would alone have contented him. He would not have raced. He would have asked intelligent questions."

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"But, Mr. Bons," said the boy humbly, "you will be a cultured person. I told them so."

"True, true, and I beg you not to disgrace me when we arrive. No gossiping. No running. Keep close to my side, and never speak to these Immortals unless they speak to you. Yes, and give me the return tickets. You will be losing them."

The boy surrendered the tickets, but felt a little sore. After all, he had found the way to this place. It was hard first to be disbelieved and then to be lectured. Meanwhile, the rain had stopped, and moonlight crept into the omnibus through the cracks in the blinds.

"But how is there to be a rainbow?" cried the boy.

"You distract me," snapped Mr. Bons. "I wish to meditate on beauty. I wish to goodness I was with a reverent and sympathetic person."

The lad bit his lip. He made a hundred good resolutions. He would imitate Mr. Bons all the visit. He would not laugh, or run, or sing, or do any of the vulgar things that must have disgusted his new friends last time. He would be very careful to pronounce their names properly, and to remember who knew whom. Achilles did not know Tom Jones — at least, so Mr. Bons said. The Duchess of Malfi was older than Mrs. Gamp — at least, so Mr. Bons said. He would be self-conscious, reticent, and prim. He would never say he liked anyone. Yet, when the blind flew up at a chance touch of his head, all these good resolutions went to the winds, for the omnibus had reached the summit of a moonlit hill, and there was the chasm, and there, across it, stood the old precipices, dreaming, with their feet in the everlasting river. He exclaimed, "The mountains! Listen to the new tune in the water! Look at the camp fires in the ravines," and Mr. Bons, after a hasty glance, retorted, "Water? Camp fires? Ridiculous rubbish. Hold your tongue. There is nothing at all."

Yet, under his eyes, a rainbow formed, compounded not of sunlight and storm, but of moonlight and the spray of the river. The three horses put their feet upon it. He thought it the finest rainbow he had seen, but did not dare to say so, since Mr. Bons said that nothing was there. He leant out — the window had opened — and sang the tune that rose from the sleeping waters.

"The prelude to *Rhinegold?*" said Mr. Bons suddenly. "Who taught you these *leit motifs?*" He, too, looked out of the window. Then he behaved very oddly. He gave a choking cry, and fell back on to the omnibus floor. He writhed and kicked. His face was green.

"Does the bridge make you dizzy?" the boy asked.

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"Dizzy!" gasped Mr. Bons. "I want to go back. Tell the driver."

But the driver shook his head.

"We are nearly there," said the boy. "They are asleep. Shall I call? They will be so pleased to see you, for I have prepared them."

Mr. Bons moaned. They moved over the lunar rainbow, which ever and ever broke away behind their wheels. How still the night was! Who would be sentry at the Gate?

"I am coming," he shouted, again forgetting the hundred resolutions. "I am returning — I, the boy."

"The boy is returning," cried a voice to other voices, who repeated, "The boy is returning."

"I am bringing Mr. Bons with me."

Silence.

"I should have said Mr. Bons is bringing me with him."

Profound silence.

"Who stands sentry?"

"Achilles."

And on the rocky causeway, close to the springing of the rainbow bridge he saw a young man who carried a wonderful shield.

"Mr. Bons, it is Achilles, armed."

"I want to go back," said Mr. Bons.

The last fragment of the rainbow melted, the wheels sang upon the living rock, the door of the omnibus burst open. Out leapt the boy — he could not resist — and sprang to meet the warrior, who, stooping suddenly, caught him on his shield.

"Achilles!" he cried, "let me get down, for I am ignorant and vulgar, and I must wait for that Mr. Bons of whom I told you yesterday."

But Achilles raised him aloft. He crouched on the wonderful shield, on heroes and burning cities, on vineyards graven in gold, on every dear passion, every joy, on the entire image of the Mountain that he had discovered, encircled, like it, with an everlasting stream. "No, no," he protested, "I am not worthy. It is Mr. Bons who must be up here."

But Mr. Bons was whimpering, and Achilles trumpeted and cried, "Stand upright upon my shield!"

"Sir, I did not mean to stand! something made me stand. Sir, why do you delay? Here is only the great Achilles, whom you knew."

Mr. Bons screamed, "I see no one. I see nothing. I want to go back." Then he cried to the driver, "Save me! Let me stop in your chariot. I have honoured you. I have quoted you. I have bound you in vellum. Take me back to my world."

The driver replied, "I am the means and not the end. I am the food and not the life. Stand by

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yourself, as that boy has stood. I cannot save you. For poetry is a spirit; and they that would worship it must worship in spirit and in truth."

Mr. Bons — he could not resist — crawled out of the beautiful omnibus. His face appeared, gaping horribly. His hands followed, one gripping the step, the other beating the air. Now his shoulders emerged, his chest, his stomach. With a shriek of "I see London," he fell — fell against the hard, moonlit rock, fell into it as if it were water, fell through it, vanished, and was seen by the boy no more. . . .

From the *Kingston Gazette, Surbiton Times, and Raynes Park Observer:*

> The body of Mr. Septimus Bons has been found in a shockingly mutilated condition in the vicinity of the Bermondsey gas works. The deceased's pockets contained a sovereign-purse, a silver cigar-case, a bijou-pronouncing dictionary, and a couple of omnibus tickets. The unfortunate gentleman had apparently been hurled from a considerable height. Foul play is suspected, and a thorough investigation is pending by the authorities.

TO FIT THE CRIME

(Continued from page 55)

The poet sobbed. He ran. "Surcease," he moaned. "Surcease."

"I'm in the plumbing game," said a man running beside him.

"It's a rough game, the plumbing game," said the man.

A side hall. Iverson Lord plunged in. Frantically.

He ran past another room. He saw people cavorting around a grey Maypole.

"By George!" they cried in ecstasy. "Great Guns! Holy Mackerel! Jimminy!"

The scholar clapped gaunt fingers over his ears. He hurled on.

Now, as he ran, there started in his ears a murmuring.

A chorus singing: "A Stitch In Time Saves Nine. Time And Tide Wait For No Man. Early To Bed, Early To Rise. Too Many Cooks Spoil The Broth."

Iverson Lord cried out: "Gods of moulded symbol! *Pity!*"

The chorus hallelujahed: "Oh Boy! Wow! Gee Whiz! Hot Stuff!" Their voices swelled into a mighty: "Land O' Goshen!"

"*Aaaaaah!*" howled the poet. "Oh my God," he cried. "This is complete, unmitigated hell!"

"YOU SAID IT!" paeaned the chorus of thousands. "AIN'T IT THE TRUTH! OH WELL, YOU CAN'T LIVE FOREVER! THAT'S THE WAY IT GOES! HERE TODAY AND GONE TOMORROW! THAT'S LIFE!"

In four-part harmony.

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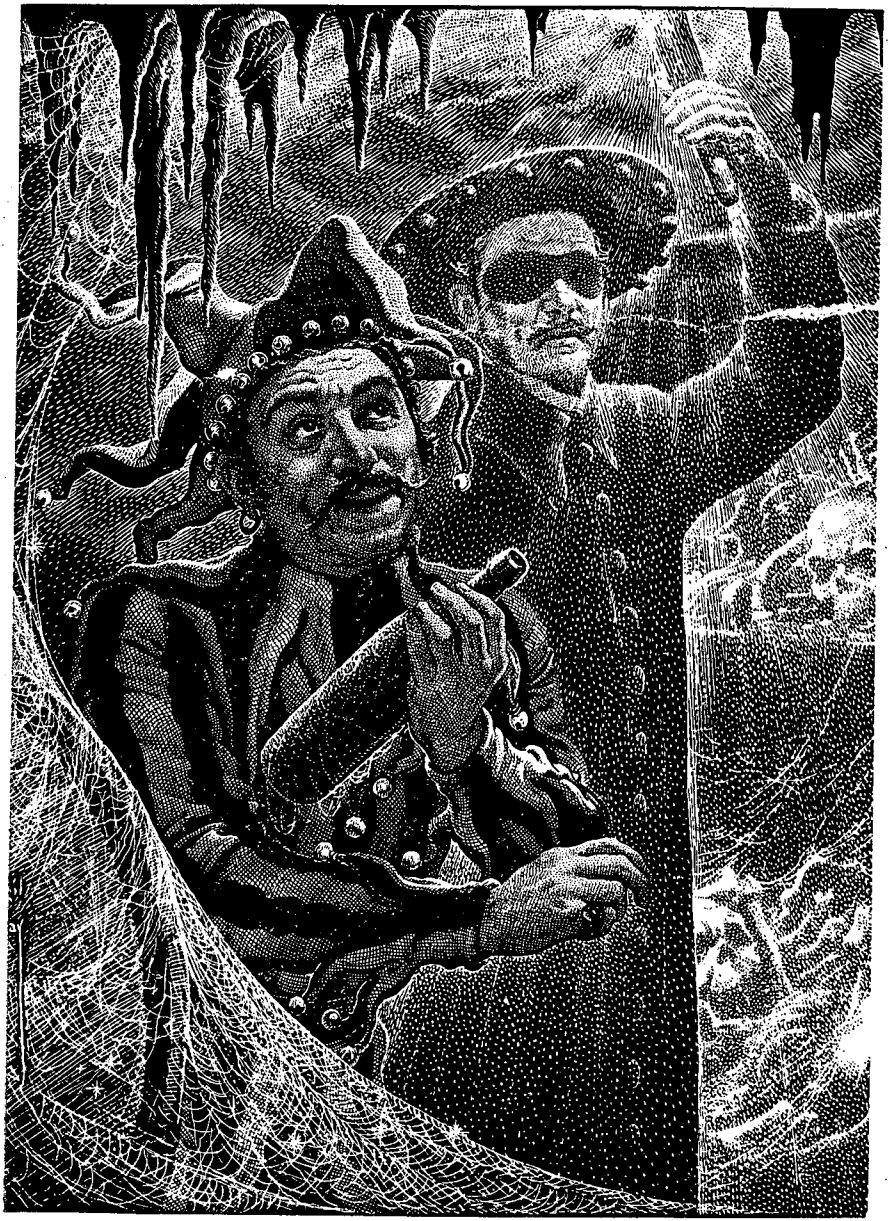

Illustrator: Virgil Finlay

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THE CASK OF Amontillado

BY EDGAR ALLAN POE

This classic tale by Poe has managed to withstand the public's mercurial tastes in reading for well over a hundred years and has appeared in publications ranging from vellum binding to comic books. Nor is the reason for this wide and continuing popularity at all obscure, for a more blood-chilling example of one man's method of revenge has never been written. Not even The Black Cat, by the same author, can match the slow, relentlessly mounting terror as Montresor and Fortunato descend into that subterranean crypt.

THE thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to threat. *At length* I would be avenged; this was a point definitely settled — but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved, precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.

It must be understood that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my goodwill. I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did

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not perceive that my smile was *now* at the thought of his immolation.

He had a weak point — this Fortunato — although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared. He prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine. Few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit. For the most part their enthusiasm is adapted to suit the time and opportunity — to practise imposture upon the British and Austrian *millionaires*. In painting and gemmary Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack — but in the matter of old wines he was sincere. In this respect I did not differ from him materially: I was skillful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could.

It was about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season, that I encountered my friend. He accosted me with excessive warmth, for he had been drinking much. The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells. I was so pleased to see him, that I thought I should never have done wringing his hand.

I said to him: "My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met. How remarkably well you are looking today! But I have received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado, and I have my doubts."

"How?" said he. "Amontillado? A pipe? Impossible! And in the middle of the carnival!"

"I have my doubts," I replied; "and I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price without consulting you in the matter. You were not to be found, and I was fearful of losing a bargain."

"Amontillado!"

"I have my doubts."

"Amontillado!"

"And I must satisfy them."

"Amontillado!"

"As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchesi. If any one has a critical turn, it is he. He will tell me —"

"Luchesi cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry."

"And yet some fools will have that his taste is a match for your own."

"Come, let us go."

"Whither?"

"To your vaults."

"My friend, no; I will not impose upon your good nature. I perceive you have an engagement. Luchesi —"

"I have no engagement; — come."

"My friend, no. It is not the engagement but the severe cold with which I perceive you are afflicted. The vaults are insufferably damp. They are encrusted with nitre."

"Let us go, nevertheless. The cold is merely nothing. Amontillado! You have been imposed

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upon. And as for Luchesi, he cannot distinguish Sherry from Amontillado."

Thus speaking, Fortunato possessed himself of my arm. Putting on a mask of black silk, and drawing a *roquelaire* closely about my person, I suffered him to hurry me to my palazzo.

There were no attendants at home; they had absconded to make merry in honor of the time. I had told them that I should not return until the morning, and had given them explicit orders not to stir from the house. These orders were sufficient, I well knew, to insure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned.

I took from their sconces two flambeaux, and giving one to Fortunato, bowed him through several suites of rooms to the archway that led into the vaults. I passed down a long and winding staircase, requesting him to be cautious as he followed. We came at length to the foot of the descent, and stood together on the damp ground of the catacombs of the Montresors.

The gait of my friend was unsteady, and the bells upon his cap jingled as he strode.

"The pipe?" said he.

"It is farther on," said I; "but observe the white webwork which gleams from these cavern walls."

He turned toward me, and looked into my eyes with two filmy orbs that distilled the rheum of intoxication.

"Nitre?" he asked, at length.

"Nitre," I replied. "How long have you had that cough?"

"Ugh! ugh! ugh! — ugh! ugh! ugh! — ugh! ugh! ugh! — ugh! ugh! ugh! — ugh! ugh! ugh!"

My poor friend found it impossible to reply for many minutes.

"It is nothing," he said, at last.

"Come," I said, with decision, "we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter. We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible. Besides, there is Luchesi —"

"Enough," he said; "the cough is a mere nothing, it will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough."

"True — true," I replied; "and, indeed, I had no intention of alarming you unnecessarily; but you should use all proper caution. A draught of this Medoc will defend us from the damps."

Here I knocked off the neck of a bottle which I drew from a long row of its fellows that lay upon the mould.

"Drink," I said, presenting him the wine.

He raised it to his lips with a leer. He paused and nodded to me familiarly, while his bells jingled.

"I drink," he said, "to the buried that repose around us."

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"And I to your long life."

He again took my arm, and we proceeded.

"These vaults," he said, "are extensive."

"The Montresors," I replied, "were a great and numerous family."

"I forget your arms."

"A huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel."

"And the motto?"

"*Nemo me impune lacessit.*"

"Good!" he said.

The wine sparkled in his eyes and the bells jingled. My own fancy grew warm with the Medoc. We had passed through walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling, into the inmost recesses of the catacombs. I paused again, and this time I made bold to seize Fortunato by an arm above the elbow.

"The nitre!" I said; "see, it increases. It hangs like moss upon the vaults. We are below the river's bed. The drops of moisture trickle among the bones. Come, we will go back ere it is too late. Your cough —"

"It is nothing," he said; "let us go on. But first, another draught of the Medoc."

I broke and reached him a flagon of De Grâve. He emptied it at a breath. His eyes flashed with a fierce light. He laughed and threw the bottle upward with a gesticulation I did not understand.

I looked at him in surprise. He repeated the movement — a grotesque one.

"You do not comprehend?" he said.

"Not I," I replied.

"Then you are not of the brotherhood."

"How?"

"You are not of the masons."

"Yes, yes," I said; "yes, yes."

"You? Impossible! A mason?"

"A mason," I replied.

"A sign," he said.

"It is this," I answered, producing a trowel from beneath the folds of my *roquelaire.*

"You jest," he exclaimed, recoiling a few paces. "But let us proceed to the Amontillado."

"Be it so," I said, replacing the tool beneath the cloak, and again offering him my arm. He leaned upon it heavily. We continued our route in search of the Amontillado. We passed through a range of low arches, descended, passed on, and descending again, arrived at a deep crypt, in which the foulness of the air caused our flambeaux rather to glow than flame.

At the most remote end of the crypt there appeared another less spacious. Its walls had been lined with human remains, piled to the vault overhead, in the fashion of the great catacombs of Paris. Three sides of this interior crypt were still ornamented in this man-

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ner. From the fourth the bones had been thrown down, and lay promiscuously upon the earth, forming at one point a mound of some size. Within the wall thus exposed by the displacing of the bones, we perceived a still interior recess, in depth about four feet, in width three, in height six or seven. It seemed to have been constructed for no especial use within itself, but formed merely the interval between two of the colossal supports of the roof of the catacombs, and was backed by one of their circumscribing walls of solid granite.

It was in vain that Fortunato, uplifting his dull torch, endeavored to pry into the depth of the recess. Its termination the feeble light did not enable us to see.

"Proceed," I said; "herein is the Amontillado. As for Luchesi —"

"He is an ignoramus," interrupted my friend, as he stepped unsteadily forward, while I followed immediately at his heels. In an instant he had reached the extremity of the niche, and finding his progress arrested by the rock, stood stupidly bewildered. A moment more and I had fettered him to the granite. In its surfaces were two iron staples, distant from each other about two feet, horizontally. From one of these depended a short chain, from the other a padlock. Throwing the links about his waist, it was but the work of a few seconds to secure it. He was too much astounded to resist. Withdrawing the key I stepped back from the recess.

"Pass your hand," I said, "over the wall; you cannot help feeling the nitre. Indeed it is *very* damp. Once more let me *implore* you to return. No? Then I must positively leave you. But I must first render you all the little attentions in my power."

"The Amontillado!" ejaculated my friend, not yet recovered from his astonishment.

"True," I replied; "the Amontillado."

As I said these words I busied myself among the pile of bones of which I have before spoken. Throwing them aside, I soon uncovered a quantity of building stone and mortar. With these materials and with the aid of my trowel, I began vigorously to wall up the entrance of the niche.

I had scarcely laid the first tier of the masonry when I discovered that the intoxication of Fortunato had in a great measure worn off. The earliest indication I had of this was a low moaning cry from the depth of the recess. It was *not* the cry of a drunken man. There was then a long and obstinate silence. I laid the second tier, and the third, and the fourth; and then I heard the furious vibrations of the chain. The noise lasted for several minutes, during which,

(*Continued on page 162*)

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Illustrator: David Stone

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The Opener of

The CRYPT

BY JOHN JAKES

Occasionally a story by one of the old masters so stimulates the interest and imagination of a present-day writer that it amounts almost to an obsession. Nothing will do but that he must carry on the plot by writing a sequel . . . although getting it published is something else again.

Anyway that's what John Jakes told us when he submitted The Opener of the Crypt. What he didn't know was that we had decided earlier to use Poe's The Cask of Amontillado — the very story that had haunted Mr. Jakes for years. So we now give you both *yarns, thereby curing Mr. Jakes' obsession and allowing us to present a chilling sequel to what many readers call the classic horror story of all time.*

I FIRST read the story when I was very young. Even then it seemed real in a way none of the other stories I read were real. As I grew up I tried to tell myself that it was nothing but a boy's imagination which gave me that sense of reality. But then I would read the story again and it wouldn't be a story any longer. It would become a real and vital truth, distorted somehow, but still real. A voice at the back of my mind always spoke to me then, whispering with a hollow solemn softness.

This is truth, the voice would say. *This is fact. This is not imagination or legend.* And I believed it. It filled every part of me, and as a grown man I was more aware of the truth than I had been as a child. And so I worked at my job

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on the *Gazette* and led my life along the streets of Paris. But I read the story again and again, until it was a part of me, until I knew that somewhere, sometime, it had existed.

Of course, I wanted to prove it to myself, to justify that quiet voice in my mind, but for years I never had the chance. And then one summer evening when the sky over the city was filled with a pale twilight, I had dinner with Dr. Armand, a good friend of mine and a historian of high standing. I remember how it was as we sat smoking our cigars and sipping our brandy. How I came one step closer to the realization of the truth that lived in my mind.

Dr. Armand reached over to a small table beside his chair and picked up a letter. He nodded his white head at me. "This ought to interest you, Paul."

"What's that you have?" I asked.

He glanced at the finely written script. "A letter from a friend of mine in Rome. It seems he was touring the seacoast last month and he ran across a highly interesting house in a small village."

I took a puff on the cigar. I tried to be calm, but something stirred inside of me. "What's so interesting about this house?"

"Well," said Dr. Armand, his gaze going out the window to the peaceful evening sky, "it's quite an old house, and almost fallen to the ground, but one of the innkeepers said it once belonged to a family named Montresor."

I sat there stupefied.

Dr. Armand waved the letter again. "Coincidence, of course, but I thought you might be interested." He chuckled quietly and continued his talk on various topics. But I didn't hear. The voice was in my mind again, speaking softly to me. *He does not believe. But you know the truth.*

"Yes!" my voice was intense.

"What did you say?" Dr. Armand looked at me, puzzled.

I made up a hasty excuse and left him, after I had pressed him for all the details. When I got back to my flat, I couldn't go to sleep. There it was! Something to prove what I believed. This bit of news made me want more proof. When morning came I went to the editor of the *Gazette* and quit my job. I took my savings out of the bank, bought a small motor car and started south.

I drove rapidly. A desire filled me and pulled me toward Italy, toward that small village, toward the proof of the legend that was for me a living truth. It was more than a desire, because I felt vaguely that a force outside myself was pulling me there. I slept at the roadside slumped over in the seat of the car, and ate only when the growling in my stomach became painful. The countryside

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raced by and I was in Italy, roaring across the plains, through the river valleys, across the rivers, disturbing the sleepy plazas and throwing up dust behind me. But I had to know!

I got tired, of course. Very tired. By the time I had gotten lost once or twice, found my way again and at last reached the coast, I was sore all over. My face felt dirty and I knew my beard had grown out quite a bit. But it was worth it. With each kilometer I drove, I knew I was getting closer to the truth.

It was early evening when I finally reached the town. I had been driving along the coast for two hours with the sea spread out to my left in a glistening sheet, when at last I pulled over the top of a small hill. I stopped the car. The town lay before me at the foot of the hill. Music and shouting drifted up from below. The streets were brightly lit. My hands gripped the steering wheel. A skyrocket shot up into the air over the town and exploded in a shower of red stars, and I knew it was carnival season!

I drove down the hill. The streets were jammed with people dressed in costume, singing and dancing and running in every direction. I pushed my way through those streets on foot, paying hardly any attention to the people, watching the houses for the name of the inn mentioned in the letter. At last I found it. I think I was a little crazy then, feeling so close to my goal, because I shoved my way roughly through the crowd and a couple of young men turned to look at me, their eyes glaring darkly through slits in their masks. I went through the door of the inn, ignoring them.

The landlord's name was Giacomo. He looked me up and down, his ancient tanned forehead wrinkling into a frown. I was a foreigner and I was not in costume. He must have felt that something was certainly wrong. And from the way I must have looked, bearded and dirty, my clothes rumpled, I suppose I couldn't blame him.

"What does the signor wish?" the old man asked me. He poured himself a glass of wine and downed it quickly.

I could hardly say the words. Excitement had made me tense, nervous. "I . . . I am looking for an old house."

He laughed loudly. I could tell he thought I was mad, and it made me angry. I wanted to lean across the table and choke the words out of him. "We have many old houses, signor. This town is full of old houses."

"This is a particular house. It belonged to a particular family. The family's name was Montresor."

He thought a minute, staring into the wine dregs. Then he

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nodded. "Yes, the Montresor house is in this town. It is a ruin, signor, tumbling to the ground. No one goes there at all any more. Why do you wish to find that particular house?"

"Never mind. Where is it?"

He gave me directions. The southern edge of the village. I tossed some coins on the table and hurried out. This time I shoved people brutally out of my way, pushing against the sticky tide of humanity roistering through the streets. The rockets blazed above me, the noise dinned in my ears, but I pushed on, driven by my desire. People hurled angry curses at me but I did not heed them. At last I broke free of the crowd and found myself in a deserted street, quite dark, with immense patches of purple shadow hiding the walls of the houses in inky impenetrability.

I hurried along the street, which suddenly became a dead end. My heart fell. I stopped at what seemed to be an iron gate and took out a match. I lit it and held it up, the reddish light flickering in an eerie manner. And my heart pounded within my chest.

For there, blazoned on the stone, was a coat of arms that I knew only too well. The large human foot grinding down upon a snake as the snake sank its fangs into the heel of that same foot. Above the symbol was the motto, and I had only to glance at the first word. *Nemo* . . . My match was suddenly extinguished by a gust of stale wind. With trembling hands I lit another. *Nemo me impune lacessit.* And below the coat — I felt a force seize me and transform me into a wildly quivering creature of fear and anguish. The name, carved in capitals that were heavy and ponderous: *Montresor!*

The second match flickered out into darkness. My heart thudding wildly, I pushed at the gate. There was a horrendous screeching noise, and I stepped quickly backward as the gate came free of its hinges and fell with a mighty clang onto the stone of the courtyard. This was the very house, and I was close to the heart of my secret! I raced across the courtyard, conscious within myself that soon I would know the reason for which I had been drawn over the years to this dark and malignantly brooding place. I would know what strange and demonically real impulse made me believe the legend as truth and made me seek proof.

The oppressive air of obsolescence and decay filled my nostrils as I stepped through the front portal into the first of the dark rooms. I knew the way . . . oh, God! I knew the way and could not turn aside! For here was the place to which I had been destined to come. Why I had been so destined, only the spirits that brooded here could explain.

I reached up to the wall and

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found a torch resting in its socket. With violently trembling hands I applied a match and soon had a flickering reddish light to guide me. My feet clattered hollowly on the cold and hoary stone. I paced quickly through the various suites of ancient rooms, each with its own particular odor of decay and desolation. The entrance to the staircase loomed before me and I hurried on, plunging downward at a rapid rate, watching as the shadows unfolded in the guttering torch glare, watching as I saw the reality of my brain becoming the reality of matter itself. Then the air became suddenly colder and I stood on damp ground. Around me stretched endless rows of wine racks, long empty of their casques, deserted and left to the scurrying rodents and the webs of dust and age that spread like grotesque mantles over the empty tiers.

The voice called to me now, surging through my brain, whirling me on and on and I could not resist its mighty power. *Come, come, make haste, make haste, the task must be performed.* What task I knew not, but I raced on nonetheless. I was will-less now, a creature drugged by the commands of an unknown preternatural force. The nitre depended from the vaulted ceiling in strangely deformed shapes, and the torchlight danced and whirled on the primeval stone of the walls. I felt the chill of the air pierce to the very marrow of my bones.

Again the vaults descended and my light fell upon the hollow black sockets of ancient skulls, scattered askew on mounds of human remains, and new terror thrilled through me as my mind signaled that I was descending beneath the river. Droplets of moisture trickled over the yellowed skulls, and rodents scratched and chittered among the piled bones. The voice spoke again, its volume increased now, its tone imperious and sonorous. *Come; make haste to perform the task!*

I passed through the low arches, descended once more, pursued my way through another lengthy passage, stepping over piles of those grisly remains, and once again hurled myself down an incline, until at last I realized with a start of overwhelming terror that I was in the deepest crypt, far in the bowels of the dark earth. My torch was seized with a gust of fetid air that made it dim and lose its intensity, so that an unearthly light of a bluish color pervaded the crypt. Here the bleached relics of human life had been mounded up to the very roof. And directly before me was a wall of masonry, and lying before it upon the ground was an ancient tool with which the masons plied their trade.

I stood in wonder and awe, realizing that here at last I had found

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the utter actuality of that which I had once only sensed vaguely. The speaker thundered his monstrous tones into the remotest crevices of my brain, and I realized that he was lodged behind the wall of masonry, imprisoned, yet powerful in all of his fiendish strength.

Break the masonry!

The command echoed and reechoed in my confused brain. I reeled dizzily and nearly dropped my light. I staggered forward, no longer a mortal, but an agent of some weird and terrible force from the great dark gulfs of supernatural power that lie far beyond the ken of mere human knowledge. I knelt and placed my torch in a heap of grisly bones, propping it up as best I could. And then I took the mason's tool into my hand and gazed at it wonderingly, my brow hot and feverish. I leaped forward, and with a fury that approached madness I attacked the masonry.

I have no conception of how long I labored. The torch dwindled slowly and I battered at the ancient stonework, chipping it away fragment by fragment, until the blood streamed off my injured hands and stained the stone with its red color. I worked feverishly, emitting whimpering sounds, howling insane curses to unknown gods, exciting myself to a pitch of brutal mindless automatism. At the end of this period of madness, I had created an opening in the masonry scarcely a foot square. I took my torch with faltering hand and thrust it before me into the aperture. And my demented eyes saw the speaker who had sought me.

There in the flickering illumination I beheld the figure floating, as in a mist, above the floor of the smaller crypt. I grew cognizant of the garb of motley, of the delicate tinkle of bells on the peaked cap, of the almost overpowering reek of wine. From out that spectral face two orbs burned, intense as the innermost fires of the underworld. The voice that spoke to me issued from that unearthly apparition.

"You have fulfilled the obligation placed upon your family by your ignoble ancestor. You have released me from my prison and set my spirit free to roam the outer spheres. The debt is paid."

"Who is speaking?" I shrieked in a frenzy. "Who addresses me thus?"

"Fortunato," was the reply. "My tormented spirit has survived my flesh."

"Fortunato!" I cried. "But why have I been chosen? Why has it been my task and mine alone to free you? Who am I to be called here thus? In God's name, speak!"

"You are Montresor," came the shade's reply.

"*Montresor!*" This I shrieked in a voice completely and utterly

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saturated with a wild madness.

"The last of the Montresor line. I have kept alive within you the spirit of that first Montresor, that infamous spirit which fed upon its own guilt and transformed itself into the spirit of a man inflamed with guilt. I have placed a compulsion upon you to free me, and you have answered."

And then I was aware of what I had only sensed before, that the immaterial substance of that first hateful Montresor who walled up the insufferable Fortunato had been transferred to me, until I was in spirit and in actuality two separate and individual beings united into a single creature!

My torch wavered once more. I reeled unsteadily on my feet, my eyes filming with the mists of madness. I swooned, but in the instant before complete unconsciousness threw its healing cloak over me, I felt a prescience whisper past me from out that small crypt, rushing by as with a great wind, flinging the tiny musical tinkle of bells behind it in supreme triumph as it ascended upward toward the earth and the starred heavens, liberated and unfettered after age upon age in the depths of the planet. I swooned completely.

And only at this moment have I awakened. My torch is extinguished. I am faint from my labor at the masonry, and am lying upon the chill earth of the crypt with its stillness penetrating into me, and I have not the will or the strength to stir. In the darkness there are the remotest of scurrying sounds. The rodents are awaiting my demise. I shall rest until the infernal shade descends, for my debt has been fully rendered.

FINAL EXAM

(Continued from page 66)

"Then what do you want?"

"*Yours*," Three said.

Back at the Ranch House, the Terra Clock struck twelve.

The Martians moved in for the kill, just as millions of their brethren were doing all over Mars. With guns and rays and ships spawned under the mountains.

Ed Crowley screamed.

"They are a dying race," said One.

"I think they're crazy," said Two.

"They're so *quaint*," said Three.

It was all over in minutes. The students had learned their lesson well. Smoothly, inexorably, while Fear and Panic raced through the night, they took their home back from their teachers.

That same morning, with a roar that shook the planet, the great Martian rockets blasted off for Earth.

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that I might hearken to it with more satisfaction, I ceased my labors and sat down upon the bones. When at last the clanking subsided, I resumed the trowel, and finished without interruption the fifth, the sixth and the seventh tier. The wall was now nearly upon a level with my breast. I again paused, and holding the flambeaux over the mason-work, threw a few feeble rays upon the figure within.

A succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form, seemed to thrust me violently back. For a brief moment I hesitated — I trembled. Unsheathing my rapier, I began to grope with it about the recess; but the thought of an instant reassured me. I placed my hand upon the solid fabric of the catacombs, and felt satisfied. I reapproached the wall. I replied to the yells of him who clamored. I re-echoed — I aided — I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this and the clamor grew still.

It was now midnight, and my task was drawing to a close. I had completed the eighth, the ninth, and the tenth tier. I had finished a portion of the last and the eleventh; there remained but a single stone to be fitted and plastered in. I struggled with its weight; I placed it partially in its destined position. But now there came from out the niche a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head. It was succeeded by a sad voice, which I had difficulty in recognizing as that of the noble Fortunato. The voice said —

"Ha! ha! ha! — he! he! — a very good joke indeed — an excellent jest. We will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo — he! he! he! — over our wine —!"

"The Amontillado!" I said.

"He! he! he! — he! he! he!; — yes, the Amontillado. But is it not getting late? Will not they be awaiting us at the palazzo, the Lady Fortunato and the rest? Let us be gone."

"Yes," I said, "let us be gone."

"*For the love of God, Montresor!*"

"Yes, for the love of God!"

But to these words I hearkened in vain for a reply. I grew impatient. I called aloud;

"Fortunato!"

No answer. I called again.

No answer still. I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within. There came forth in return only a jingling of the bells. My heart grew sick — on account of the dampness of the catacombs. I hastened to make an end of my labor. I forced the last stone into its position; I plastered it up. Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. *In pace requiescat!*

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